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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

THE CELEBRATION OF SELF-RELIANCE IN THE FICTION OF MARY WILKINS FREEMAN

by

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

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FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, for acceptance, a thesis entitled "The Celebration of Self-Reliance in the Fiction of Mary Wilkins Freeman," submitted by Rosamond Smith Bailey in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Date Jan 17, 1975

ABSTRACT

Mary Wilkins Freeman's place in literature today is among the regional writers of New England. Her chief merit supposedly lies in her handling of neurotic case studies emerging from an environment of stark poverty and Puritan repression.

It is my purpose to demonstrate that Mrs. Freeman's best work possesses universality. She celebrates the heroic struggles of her protagonists for independence, and at the same time presents a quiet but unmistakable arraignment of conformist society. Since her characters move in a setting of domestic trivia and local color, it is assumed that they cannot be seen in a heroic perspective. I intend to show that these apparent trivialities are in fact the outward signs of serious confrontations between society and the individual.

In addition, I shall be showing that Mrs. Freeman's apparent lapses into sentiment in her best fiction are actually subtle alterations of the popular literary modes of the period. Through this technique she implies that her own moral values are based not upon sentimental ideals of virtue and romance, but upon inner strength and courage.

Finally, I intend to give some attention to the

way in which her later work was dominated by the same fictional conventions that she had adapted and reversed in her earlier writings. To the end of her career, Mary Wilkins Freeman attempted to maintain her themes of conflict, triumph, and defeat, but the overlay of sentiment and melodrama, a concession to popular taste, compromised the value of most of her later fiction. Yet she never gave in completely to public pressures; even at its worst her writing shows traces of originality. In refusing to give in altogether to the pressures of the marketplace, she reveals courage and endurance comparable to the qualities of her heroic protagonists.

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To Professor Edward Foster, Mrs. Freeman's biographer, I am indebted for two of her original letters and a photograph.

Finally, I am grateful to my husband, who became a convert to Mary Wilkins Freeman in self-defense and who provided me with an immeasurable amount of moral support during the writing of this paper.

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INTRODUCTION

i

Mary Wilkins Freeman, a popular writer at the turn of the century, has today faded into obscurity. The scant critical attention accorded her is limited to her worth as a regional writer who recorded some of the peculiarities of late nineteenth-century New England. To show that she deserves a more prominent place in American literature, particularly because of her universality of theme and her deft handling of the conventions of sentimental fiction, is the intention of this paper.

As a preface to my discussion of Mrs. Freeman's more significant contribution to American letters, I include a brief summary of her life and literary career. It is necessary to sketch in at least a few personal features if I am properly to reintroduce an author whose name has been virtually forgotten.

Mrs. Freeman was herself a daughter of the New England region that was to provide the creative inspiration for her best fiction. She was born Mary Ella Wilkins at Randolph, Massachusetts on October 31, 1852.[1] (She later changed her middle name to Eleanor, her mother's name.)

In 1862 the family moved to Brattleboro, Vermont, where Warren Wilkins, her father, abandoned his carpentry trade for a dry goods business--one of the many get-rich-quick schemes that kept the household on the edge of poverty. The ineffectual male characters in her early fiction (often represented as fathers incapable of supporting their families) may well have had their basis in memories of her own childhood.

Following her high school graduation in 1870, Mary Wilkins attended Mount Holyoke for a year. She subsequently attempted to earn a living by teaching in a local school for girls, but resigned in the spring of 1874, possibly because of the ill health that was to plague her throughout her life. Fred Lewis Pattee has suggested that Mary Wilkins "turned to the short story as a desperate last resort" after her father's death in 1883 left her with the necessity of supporting herself.[2] In fact, she chose rather to go on with the writing career that she had already begun. "I was forced to work for my mere living," she wrote to Pattee in 1919, "and of course continued writing . . . although when my father . . . died, I had earned very little. I had written only three stories, that is real stories for adults. One was a prize story, $50, the others were accepted by Harper and Brothers."[3] The prize story, "A Shadow Family," has apparently not survived. "I loaned that and it was never returned, and no copy exists," she reported to Henry Lanier.[4]

Mary Wilkins's writing career was really launched by the publication of "Two Old Lovers" in Harper's Bazar in 1882. Evidence of growing interest in her is revealed by requests from both Harper's and the Lothrop Publishing Company to be given exclusive control of her work.[5] In addition, Lothrop paid her the dubious compliment of pirating some of her stories. "I think that the Lothrops are rather peculiar in their dealings with me," she confided--with typical New England restraint--to Miss Booth of Harper's Bazar.[6]

Two collections of juvenile tales, Goody Two Shoes (1883) and The Cow with Golden Horns (1884), contain conventional fairy-tale material. Of more merit is The Adventures of Ann (1886), which is based upon documents of local Randolph history. Ann Ginnins, the "bound girl," is an early anticipation of the independent and unsentimental heroine who was to become Mary Wilkins Freeman's most vigorous type of protagonist.

With A Humble Romance (1887) and A New England Nun (1891), public recognition was established. These two collections represent her finest work; she had turned from her earlier fantasy tales and was now producing original and realistic material based upon New England life. Although, as I intend to show, she extended her scope beyond the purely regional, it is difficult to refer to her writing without using terms applicable to the New England character: strength, starkness, terseness, dry humor. Her short story collections

continued to appear at intervals; they are generally more readable than her novels although they do not approach the standards set by A Humble Romance and A New England Nun. For a glimpse of Freeman heroines in miniature, one might look at the stories in Young Lucretia (1892), whose very youthful protagonists exhibit the same courage and endurance found in their elder sisters.

Experiments with various genres and sub-genres characterized the writing of Mary Wilkins in the final decade of the century. Silence (1898), The Love of Parson Lord (1900), and The Fair Lavinia (1907) represent her attempts to write short fiction with a romantic colonial setting. Unfortunately she abandoned her terse style in favor of an elaborate phrasing that makes these stories tedious and scarcely worth reading. People of Our Neighborhood (1898) and The Jamesons (1899) are humorous but slight sketches of local life. In Understudies (1901) and Six Trees (1903) she turned to nature studies with overtones of Thoreauvian mysticism. The Wind in the Rose-Bush (1903) is an original and effective collection of ghost stories set in New England. When she attempted to return to her simple and straightforward tales, she produced nothing comparable to her first two adult collections. The Givers (1904), The Winning Lady (1909), and The Copy Cat (1914) are, with one or two exceptional stories, superficial in concept. They also reveal a disturbing amount of intrusive moralizing--a trait of which the author was seldom

guilty in her earlier work. Only in her last collection, Edgewater People (1918), did she recapture a touch of her earlier strength.

Rather than continuing to make the short story her chief fictional medium, Mary Wilkins turned very soon to other forms less suited to her talent. Jane Field (1893), technically her first novel, is little more than a padded short story. Although it has a vigorous opening, it lapses into the artificial plot devices that she was to use so frequently in her novels. An exception is Pembroke (1894), whose soundness of theme and carefully integrated plot reveal that she had the ability to handle the form of the novel without resorting to padding and mechanical tricks. After Pembroke, however, she reverted in her novels to popular literary trends, abandoning her simple yet vigorous material in favor of sentiment and sensationalism. In 1895 she wrote a prize-winning murder novelette, The Long Arm, in collaboration with J. E. Chamberlin. This was followed in 1896 by Madelon, an attempt at lurid melodrama. Jerome (1897) is an uneasy combination of social criticism and the Horatio Alger myth. Some praise has been given to The Portion of Labor (1901) for its socio-economic theme, but again the book is encumbered by sentimental machinery. The Heart's Highway (1900) is, fortunately, her sole contribution to the genre of the historical novel. Its highly artificial style and shallow romantic plot could scarcely be further removed from the terse vitality of her New

England tales. In The Debtor (1905) and Doc Gordon (1906) she reached the nadir of her literary career; these books are little more than hack work. By the Light of the Soul (1906), which Foster regards as "spiritual autobiography," is an extended piece of silly and improbable woman's fiction, comparable perhaps to the Harlequin Romances of today. The Shoulders of Atlas, written in 1908, is a considerable improvement, for its romantic and sensational content is subordinated to a strong psychological theme. With The Butterfly House (1912) and An Alabaster Box (1917), the latter written in collaboration with Florence Morse Kingsley, Mrs. Freeman revealed a partial return to more realistic material, although she was never able to free herself completely from the long period of sentimental and melodramatic writing in which she had indulged.

Of her attempts at verse, the less said the better. Her one published volume, Decorative Plaques (1883), lives up to its gift-book title. Her best effort, "The Ostrich," is a delightful poem still found in anthologies of children's poetry. She also turned to the drama during her explorations of literary genres. Her one published play, Giles Corey, Yeoman (1893), based on the Salem witch trials, was highly praised at the time. It is written in her early vigorous style rather than her colonial effusiveness and contains some strong material. Unfortunately she thought it necessary to superimpose a conventional love story upon her historical setting, and this treatment lessens the

impact of the heroic suffering of Giles Corey. Apparently she had considered writing a realistic New England play after the manner of Ibsen,[8] but either the project was abandoned or the manuscript was lost, since there is no evidence of its survival in any collections of her manuscripts.[9]

After 1918 Mary Wilkins Freeman published only occasional contributions to magazines--verses, short articles, light fiction. Advancing age, poor health, and an unhappy marriage all contributed to her withdrawal. Hamlin Garland commented, "Of late she has dropped out of all our circles. . . . Some say she has become difficult in her old age and that she is a recluse, bitter and resentful. I do not know."[10] Dr. Charles M. Freeman, whom she married in 1901, has been blamed (probably unjustly) for her literary decline, either because he persuaded her to write for the popular market or because he removed her from her New England setting to New Jersey. At any rate, the marriage ended in a legal separation. It is ironic that Mary Wilkins Freeman's own life in some ways paralleled the course of her writing career in moving away from the quiet, everyday existence of New England to the stuff of melodrama --a life with an allegedly drink-crazed husband who had to be committed to an asylum (from which he escaped on one occasion) and who disinherited her, leaving everything to his chauffeur.[11]

If her output was now meager, her popularity was still well established. In 1925 she was awarded the William

Dean Howells Medal, and in 1926 she was made a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters. Henry W. Lanier in 1927 brought out a good representative collection, The Best Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman. Requests for permission to reprint her writings involved much confusion, not only because of the new copyright laws but because of her own inability to recall many of the original arrangements about publishing rights.[12] She was a much better writer than she was a businesswoman; she depended far too much upon her own memory and upon the honesty of others.

Mary Wilkins Freeman died at Metuchen, New Jersey, on March 13, 1930. The greater portion of her fiction was beginning to fade from view; that which remained was to be duly docketed by critics and literary historians as part of the local color movement of the late nineteenth century.

ii

At the present time, Mrs. Freeman's place in American literature is essentially that of a regionalist. She is valued as a collector of literary case histories arising out of the socio-economic decay of New England and the residue of Puritanism. Her outlook is considered pessimistic; critics see her protagonists as pitiable victims of an environment dominated by poverty and the remnants of Calvinistic doctrine. For instance, Vernon L. Parrington refers to the "grim and stark ugliness that resulted from

the long Puritan repressions."[13] Russell Blankenship emphasizes the "narrow, repressed and barren lives" of her people.[14] And Van Wyck Brooks is preoccupied with the background of run-down farmhouses and shabby parlors where "Death pervaded the air, and what remained of life seemed to have reached a state of fossilization."[15] Such interpretations focus upon Mrs. Freeman as an essentially pessimistic writer whose characters are psychologically crippled because of their imprisonment in a decaying society that is near-Gothic in its grimness. Even less extreme viewpoints tend to stress her writing as a series of case studies in abnormal psychology. The qualities of stubborn pride and rigid will supposedly peculiar to New England are only grudgingly recognized as a necessary defense against the destruction of the identity. Austin Warren does admit that pride, as it is developed in Mrs. Freeman's work, has some redeeming qualities; it is a force without which her characters "would lose their desire to live, their psychic structure."[16] Yet he goes on to say that such pride is isolating as well as sustaining; it "has, finally, to be broken down--if not through a 'breakdown' through a public confession."[17] Similarly, Edward Foster, Mrs. Freeman's sole biographer, discusses her work almost wholly in the light of two pejorative phrases, diseased will and neurotic pride. Foster admits that her characters are "dowered with courage and loyalty and a strong sense of duty," but insists that "their gestures of revolt are

never quite conclusive, never fully satisfying. Necessarily, they are frustrated and neurotic to a degree."[18]

It is my intention to demonstrate that many of these protagonists are in fact less frustrated and neurotic than such comments indicate. I find that Mrs. Freeman's critics often impose their own moral judgments as to what constitutes unhealthy behavior in her characters, calling certain attitudes "neurotic" simply because they are unconventional. They do not ascertain whether the author concurs with their point of view. Before proceeding further, it might be useful to give my own working definitions of heroic and neurotic, terms used (and sometimes misused) by Mrs. Freeman's critics in order to evaluate her protagonists. I am presenting these definitions according to my interpretation of Mrs. Freeman's own apparent standards of mental and psychological well-being. Those characters who struggle against adverse social forces that are demeaning to independence and self-respect, or that oppose their personal moral principles, are in Mrs. Freeman's view courageous--or heroic; their attitude represents an Emersonian defiance of stifling conformity. On the other hand, those who fall victim to social pressures that produce compulsive rather than autonomous behavior are unhealthy--or neurotic; their sense of identity is weakened and their capacity for happiness is severely limited. According to these standards, the heroic individuals predominate in the fiction of Mrs. Freeman. Those figures who are bound by compulsive and

rigid patterns of conduct are also given some positive qualities of courage and endurance that help to alleviate their psychological distortions. If they are defeated by certain aspects of their environment, they triumph over others. I intend to show that Mary Wilkins Freeman is basically optimistic in that she celebrates the individual who, through courage and independence, gains a measure of victory over the adverse pressures of his environment.

It has been argued that even though certain Freeman characters do exhibit admirable traits of defiance, their efforts are futile and pathetic because they are placed in a narrow setting that is not conducive to heroic action. Some critics consider that no opportunity exists in Mrs. Freeman's fiction for grand and dramatic gestures. Brooks speaks of the "minor triumphs" that are permitted to take place.[19] Jay Martin avers that Freeman characters "have no purpose worthy of commitment. . . . Lacking a heroic society, Mary Wilkins's heroes are debased; noble in being, they are foolish in action."[20] Charles M. Thompson makes the slighting remark that "of the twenty-eight stories in A Humble Romance [sic] every one is told from the point of view of some woman--and . . . there are very few which do not deal with one of those family or neighborhood quarrels which have been referred to as the staple of women's gossip in small country towns."[21] I intend to demonstrate, however, that such characters are in fact involved in a more serious moral conflict and that

the apparently trivial, domestic issues upon which these struggles are based are only the outward signs of more significant confrontations.

Finally, Mrs. Freeman's theme of individuals opposing adverse social pressures has been seen as a study of regional peculiarities that provide light entertainment for her readers as well as material useful to social historians. One critic even makes a statistical survey: "In the census of a Mary Wilkins village the proportion of inhabitants would approximate sixty women upwards of seventy years old, five old men, fifteen middle-aged women, eight middle-aged men, seven girls, three eligible bachelors, two children."[22] Others evaluate the author according to the accuracy of her research into local customs. J. E. Chamberlin writes that "she knew the life, the cultural ideal, the character traits of the middle-class New England villager. She wrote of what she knew best."[23] And Martin praises her for having "delineated in full the humorless, vacant, mindless, narrow New Englander."[24] That her depiction of New England society might have a wider and more universal application has not been recognized. It remains, in the phrase of F. L. Pattee, a "terminal moraine"[25] that may be studied as a curiosity but that has no real significance for the rest of the world. I will be showing that Mrs. Freeman's depiction of village life and manners is actually the foundation upon which she superimposes images reflecting and underlining her theme of individual

heroism--a theme that is not necessarily limited to any one region. In Emily Dickinson's words, Mary Wilkins Freeman could "see New Englandly"; yet her vision extends beyond local boundaries to the broadest perspective of universal human experience.

iii

The presence of sentimental material in the fiction of Mrs. Freeman has been generally deplored as detrimental to her value as a realist. William Dean Howells saw in her work a romantic element that, in his opinion, would have been better eliminated. "In the interest of her art," he wrote, "it could almost be wished that she might once write a thoroughly romantic story, and wreak in it all the impulses she has in that direction."[26] Most critics agree with Howells. Anthony Hilfer refers to her "sentimental resolutions that dissolve the genuine tensions they build up in a factitious glow of brotherliness."[27] Granville Hicks comments, "She could not . . . resist the temptation of the happy ending; her unfortunates are always compensated for their sufferings."[28] These critics are not, by the way, discussing Mrs. Freeman's later work, in which sentiment and melodrama do predominate; they are speaking of her best fiction, A Humble Romance and A New England Nun. It is my purpose in this paper to point out that the sentimental elements in her best writing make a positive contribution to its value. Those who see such elements only as regrettable intrusions are overlooking the possi-

bility that Mrs. Freeman was using these conventions for a specific purpose. By her manipulation of standard plots and stereotypes, she casts an ironic light upon the fiction so popular at that time--the sentimental literature that both reflected and nourished the complacent optimism of nineteenth-century America.

Mrs. Freeman was not, of course, alone in her arraignment of this sort of writing. William Dean Howells, Mark Twain, and Edward Eggleston were among those whose voices were simultaneously being raised against sentimental fiction. In Howells and the Age of Realism, Everett Carter discusses the literary movement that grew out of this reaction against the "rosy-hued sentimental distortions" of popular literature. From this struggle against an immensely prolific and well-established market emerged such works as Howells's A Foregone Conclusion and The Rise of Silas Lapham, in which characters are exposed to our criticism for indulging in sentimental role-playing. Mark Twain satirized Fenimore Cooper, and in Huckleberry Finn condemned romance as a cultural influence.[29] The worst aspect of popular fiction for Howells, Twain and other realists was its untruthfulness; they called it "literary lying." That it was also stereotyped and mass-produced does not seem to have perturbed them quite so much as that it was immoral. Mrs. Freeman apparently made no explcit condemnation of this sort of literature, but her anti-sentimental plot schemes gently ridicule some of the existing literary conventions. Further, they represent a protest

against the foolish and unrealistic sentimental codes that could, in real life, prove detrimental to those who believed in them.

Finally, I think it is relevant to look briefly at the direction in which Mrs. Freeman's involvement with sentimental fiction eventually led her. In her later novels one still finds individuals in conflict with their environment; her theme of heroism is sometimes extended to include a crusade aimed at improving social conditions. Rather than heightening the effect of these works by continuing to reverse and adapt sentimental plots and stereotypes, Mrs. Freeman gave in to popular conventions and sugar-coated her novels with the stuff the public loved: romance, sentiment, melodrama, suspense.

I do not intend to give a detailed analysis of Mrs. Freeman's attempts to shape her writing to the form of the novel. Such a study has already been carried out by Thomas R. Knipp in his dissertation, "The Quest for Form: The Fiction of Mary Wilkins Freeman." Knipp's principal thesis is that Mrs. Freeman compromised her novels because she imitated "the conventions of Dickensian melodrama" rather than attempting to structure them around "a world-view or an intellectual system."[30] I have already indicated my intention to present evidence that universal themes are to be found throughout the best fiction of Mary Wilkins Freeman, in particular the motif of the self-reliant individual. This theme is not lacking in her novels,

but it is too often obscured by the extraneous sentimental and sensational material, as well as by the awkwardly handled social commentary.

I will limit my discussion to an aspect of Mrs. Freeman's "quest for form" that Knipp virtually overlooked. Mrs. Freeman seems to have held the conviction that a fictional work of novel length required some romantic interest, whether or not such material was relevant to her theme of the individual struggling to maintain integrity and independence. Although she is able in Pembroke to make the romantic plots an integral part of the book, she fails in most later works to justify the presence of the love plot. Rather than altering and inverting sentimental elements for greater ironic effect, she introduces them as essential parts of her fiction.

It will seem rather anticlimactic to conclude my paper by describing some of Mrs. Freeman's weaknesses, and yet I think that it is necessary to evaluate her work in some sort of perspective. She wrote a great deal more than A Humble Romance, A New England Nun, and Pembroke, although these books represent her best writing. To maintain a positive approach, I will use Pembroke in contrast with a few representative works from her later years in order to illustrate the way in which this novel uses sentimental and romantic material effectively as the others do not. I will also discuss The Shoulders of Atlas as a relatively impressive novel whose positive aspects have been

neglected. It would not be accurate to say that Mrs. Freeman was unable to write good novels; Pembroke proves that she wrote at least one. The great quantity of questionable fiction that she produced between 1895 and 1912 shows, I think, that Mary Wilkins Freeman deliberately chose to incorporate popular sentimental material into her novels. I will show that such material is equally as damaging to her theme of moral heroism as is the more obtrusive sensationalism that Knipp considers so detrimental to her later work. Yet even among her worst productions one may find traces of her former vigor. Although beset by the demands of the literary market, Mary Wilkins Freeman--like the protagonists of her best fiction--retained a measure of strength and individuality to the end.

NOTES

[1] For the biographical material I am indebted to Edward Foster's Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (New York: Hendricks House, 1956), and to Mary R. Cabot's Annals of Brattleboro (Brattleboro, Vt.: E. L. Hildreth, 1922).

[2] A History of American Literature since 1870 (New York: Century, 1915), p. 317.

[3] Letter, Mary Wilkins Freeman to F. L. Pattee, September 5, 1919, Pennsylvania State University, Pattee Library, Fred Lewis Pattee Papers.

[4] See introduction to The Best Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman, ed. Henry W. Lanier (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1927), p. ix.

[5] Letter, Mary Wilkins to Mary Louise Booth, February 12, 1885, University of Virginia, Clifton Waller Barrett Library, Mary Wilkins Freeman Collection.

[6] Letter, Mary Wilkins to Miss Booth and Mrs. Wright, March 17, 1886, University of Virginia.

[7] Foster, p. 170.

[8] Letters, Mary Wilkins to Harper & Brothers, April 14, 1893; to Richard Watson Gilder of The Century, August 4, 1899; to Richard Watson Gilder, August 12, 1899; all at Columbia University, Butler Library, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman Letters.

[9] In order to ascertain where Mrs. Freeman's letters and manuscripts were located, I used American Literary Manuscripts, ed. Joseph Jones et al. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1960) as a guide. I also corresponded with Edward Foster, Mrs. Freeman's biographer, who had access to some of her unpublished material. From none of these sources was I able to obtain information about any Freeman play other than Giles Corey.

[10] Hamlin Garland's Diaries, ed. Donald Pizer (San

Marino: Huntington Library, 1968), p. 129. The entry is taken from the 1920-1925 section.

[11] Foster, p. 187.

[12] See correspondence between Mary Wilkins Freeman and William H. Briggs of Harper & Brothers, November 16, 1927 to June 21, 1928, Pierpont Morgan Library, Harper Collection.

[13] Main Currents of American Thought, III: The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958), p. 66.

[14] American Literature as an Expression of the National Mind (New York: H. Holt, 1945), p. 445.

[15] New England: Indian Summer (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1940), p. 467.

[16] The New England Conscience (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), p. 159.

[17] Ibid., p. 161.

[18] Foster, pp. 190-191.

[19] Brooks, p. 471.

[20] Harvests of Change: American Literature 1865-1914 (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 151.

[21] "Idealist in Masquerade," Atlantic Monthly, 83 (May 1899), 670.

[22] Mary Moss, "Representative American Storytellers," Bookman, 24 (September 1906). Quoted in Blanche Williams, Our Short Story Writers (1922; rpt. Freeport, N. Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), pp. 173-174.

[23] "Miss Mary E. Wilkins at Randolph, Mass.," Critic,

32 (March 5, 1898), 155.

[24] Martin, p. 148.

[25] "On the Terminal Moraine of New England Puritanism," Sidelights on American Literature (New York: Century, 1922).

[26] Review of A New England Nun and Other Stories, Harper's Magazine, 83 (June 1891), 156.

[27] The Revolt from the Village, 1915-1930 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), p. 49.

[28] The Great Tradition: An Interpretation of American Literature since the Civil War, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1935), p. 56.

[29] Howells and the Age of Realism (New York: Lippincott, 1954), pp. 46 ff.

[30] "The Quest for Form: The Fiction of Mary Wilkins Freeman," Diss. Michigan State 1966, p. 3.

CHAPTER I

> If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life . . . for fear that I should get some of his good done to me. . . . I would rather suffer evil the natural way.
>
> --Henry David Thoreau

The profession of Doing-good that Thoreau disparaged in Walden was to reach its zenith in America during the later nineteenth century. Certain memorable names are associated with this period of social reform. Susan B. Anthony and Lucy Stone were among the prominent defenders of the downtrodden female sex. Anthony Comstock, crusader for purity in literature, established the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. Timothy Shay Arthur and Carry Nation--one with pen, the other with hatchet--fought against the ravages of Demon Rum. Less spectacular reformers also worked to alleviate the distresses of their fellow men. Jane Addams, a pioneer in the relief of urban poverty, opened Hull House in a Chicago slum district. Rebecca Harding Davis, one spokeswoman for the rural poor, deplored the social conditions of New England villages and suggested that philanthropic women of the region might do

well to look nearer home for those in need of charity.[1] While controversies might rage over the morality of female suffrage, temperance, or literary censorship, the value of philanthropy was seldom seriously questioned. Since poverty was considered one of the worst social evils, those who bestowed material assistance upon the poor were hailed as noble humanitarians. Of all the ways of Doing-good, benevolence was held in the highest regard.

Much of the popular fiction of the time reflects this idealization of the benefactor. In the works of Augusta J. Evans Wilson, Mary Jane Holmes, and Horatio Alger, Jr., the careers of the orphaned protagonists were often furthered by the intervention of wealthy and kind-hearted people who provided work, money, or even a home for the poor orphan. It is unusual to find stories from the same era in which the author defends the right of the pauper to reject charity and at the same time condemns the worthy philanthropist. This reversal of the conventional point of view is found, however, in the best fiction of Mary Wilkins Freeman. Rather than assuming that the poor should be supplied with material benefits, Mrs. Freeman points out that charity may actually be an evil rather than a blessing.

Mrs. Freeman shows that it is the stigma attached to poverty that is most destructive to the individual; physical deprivations are less important to her. Even in the nineteenth century, Americans had not quite rid themselves of the old Puritan belief that God bestowed material

benefits on the righteous but withheld them from sinners. The attitude of a piously materialistic society toward its unsuccessful members is summed up by Richard Tawney: "A society which reverences the attainment of riches as the supreme felicity will naturally be disposed to regard the poor as damned in the next world, if only to justify itself for making their life a hell in this."[2] This sort of thinking seems to have inspired the intolerant comment of Catharine Sedgwick: "In all our widespread country there is very little necessary poverty. In New England none that is not the result of vice and disease."[3] Although the benevolent people in Mrs. Freeman's fiction do not overtly show the harsh moral superiority of Miss Sedgwick or her Puritan forefathers, they nevertheless fail to recognize the objects of their charity as people with a need for self-respect. In the words of Thoreau, they are too concerned with doing their good to consider whether such attentions are really beneficial; they bestow gifts with a complete lack of sensitivity toward the recipient. The reaction of the poor against such determined benevolence, or the threat of it, is accordingly shown not as evidence of eccentricity but as a defensive measure taken in order to assert themselves as self-respecting individuals. They consider the label of pauper to be degrading.

Mrs. Freeman's critics tend to interpret her tales of poverty as fictional illustrations of rural conditions such as those described by Rebecca Harding Davis: "These

people have not enough food for their bodies, or occupation for their minds. The niggardly economy forced upon their forefathers by the barren soil is not bewailed by them as a belittling necessity, but is honored as the chief of virtues."[4] This picture of physical and emotional starvation is emphasized as an important aspect of the work of Mrs. Freeman. Martin calls her portrayal of New England life "the rural version of the urban ghetto," finding it an anticipation of the stories of Hamlin Garland.[5] Brooks sees her characters as "fighting a losing battle against fire, mortgage and illness and almost as much against life as they fought against death."[6] Yet to consider these characters only in the context of physical survival is to understand only a small part of the conflict the author is describing. Her poverty-stricken protagonists are striving to maintain their personalities as well as their bodies, and their most formidable opponent is not the wolf at the door but the charitable neighbor with her basket.

A good example of this conflict between the pauper and the benevolent society is found in "A Mistaken Charity."[7] Harriet Shattuck and her blind sister exist in a ramshackle cottage, managing just to survive on the few vegetables they grow, the greens and berries they gather, and occasional baskets of food from neighbors. Harriet imposes her own code of acceptance upon this necessary charity. She tells one caller, for instance, that the doughnuts brought by the latter are "turrible tough"--and then takes the basket into

the cottage, grumbling, "If there is anything I 'spise on this airth it's a tough doughnut" (p. 239). This scene may seem to reflect little more than comic eccentricity and inconsistent behavior, since Harriet first rejects and then accepts the offering. So far she is apparently a crochety and ill-natured old woman in contrast with the neighbor, Mrs. Simonds, who seems a kindly and patient woman who is willing to endure near-insult for the sake of charity. Suddenly, however, a different perspective is introduced by Harriet's straightforward, if homely, speech to her sister:

> "Charlotte, do you want everybody to look down on us, an' think we ain't no account at all, just like any beggars, 'cause they bring us in vittles? . . . Do you want <u>to go to the poorhouse</u>? . . . Then don't hender me agin when I tell folks their doughnuts is tough an' their pertaters is poor. If I don't kinder keep up an' show some sperrit, I sha'n't think nothing of myself, an' other folks won't nuther, and fust thing we know they'll kerry us to the poorhouse. You'd 'a been there before now if it hadn't been for me, Charlotte."
>
> (pp. 240-241)

Harriet's sharpness does not necessarily reflect an ungrateful, ill-natured disposition; rather it reveals a calculated defense against charity. She refuses to think of herself as a pauper, and she is determined not to act like one in the eyes of the community. She may be of humble and uneducated beginnings, but she is shrewd enough to recognize that too much gratitude is demeaning.

Mrs. Simonds decides to carry her philanthropy

one step further; she arranges to send the two sisters to an old people's home so that they may be more comfortable. This may seem an admirable project, except that the author proceeds to deliver a few subtle but telling blows at its foundation. She describes Mrs. Simonds as "a smart, energetic person, bent on doing good. . . . To be sure, she always did it in her own way. If she chose to give hot doughnuts, she gave hot doughnuts; it made not the slightest difference to her if the recipients of her charity would infinitely have preferred ginger cookies" (p. 242). What begins as apparent praise ends on a note of condemnation; this woman is grossly insensitive to the feelings of the poor. Mrs. Freeman becomes more explicitly ironic as she describes the reaction of the sisters to this generous offer: "The struggle to persuade them to abandon their tottering old home for a better was a terrible one. . . . and when they yielded at last it was with a sad grace for the recipients of a worthy charity" (p. 243). And in her description of the departure of Harriet and Charlotte for the Home, she is bitingly sarcastic: "Mrs. Simonds, the widow, the minister, and the gentleman from the 'Home' who was to take charge of them, were all at the depot, their faces beaming with the delight of successful benevolence. But the two poor old women looked like two forlorn prisoners in their midst. It was an impressive illustration of the truth of the saying 'that it is more blessed to give than to receive'" (p. 244). This Biblical motto, conventionally

applied to charitable individuals, is here given a bitter twist. The isolation of the victim of charity is vividly shown in this picture of self-congratulation that fails to recognize or to understand human misery even when standing right beside it. Mrs. Freeman's use of the term prisoners intensifies the reversal of the normal situation; she suggests that the benefactors are in fact like policemen or warders arranging for the sisters to be transferred to an institution in which their freedom will be restricted.

Harriet and Charlotte are unhappy at the Home, with its many regulations concerning dress, behavior, and general attitude. The author suggests that even a humane, well-run institution may be as destructive to the human spirit as a Dickensian workhouse, and perhaps even more so, because pressures more subtle than cruelty or overwork are involved. If conformity and gratitude are exacted from the inmates, their sense of independence and self-respect may be destroyed. That well-intentioned restrictions may crush the spirit is shown particularly through the reactions of the blind Charlotte to her new environment. She has always seen "chinks" of light in her happiest moments and persists in affirming the existence of these "chinks" despite the contemptuous disbelief of her pragmatic sister. At the Home all is in darkness for Charlotte. She pleads with Harriet: "I can't stay here no ways in this world. . . . I don't want to die here; it ain't so straight up to heaven from here. O Lord, I've felt as if I was slantendicular from

heaven ever since I've been here, an' it's been so awful dark. I ain't had any chinks. I want to go home" (p. 245). The sustaining of Charlotte's personality seems to depend on these illuminations; it is even possible to see her as a kind of mystic who is granted transcendental flashes denied to more strong-minded individuals. All that charity has done for her is to bring her "slantendicular from heaven"--a localism transformed into a poignant outcry--and to take from her the glimpses of light that comfort her.

One might nevertheless consider that these two old women would have been better off in an institution, considering the squalor of their former home. Yet a close look at Mrs. Freeman's portrayal of their dwelling reveals more than sordid poverty. The cottage is so decayed that "nature had almost completely overrun and obliterated the work of man, and taken her own to herself again, till the house seemed as much of a natural ruin as an old tree-stump" (p. 236). What might have been a setting suitable for an illustration of the grim New England described by Rebecca Harding Davis is transformed into a not unattractive picture of nature reclaiming what belongs to her. The implication is that it would be more fitting for Harriet and Charlotte to end their lives by gradually blending with the wilderness.

The closeness of the sisters to nature is made more explicit in a further paragraph: "The delight which the two poor old souls took in their own pumpkins, their apples and currants, was indescribable. It was not merely that

they contributed largely toward their living; they were their own, their private share of the great wealth of nature, the little taste set apart for them alone out of her bounty, and worth more to them on that account, though they were not conscious of it, than all the richer fruits which they received from their neighbors' gardens" (p. 238). Here is something that the self-appointed charitable committee did not perceive when they decided to attend to this particular welfare case--the spiritual value of an existence that is, materially speaking, poor and pitiful. Harriet and Charlotte are like wild creatures surviving contentedly enough in their natural environment, but who are taken forcibly from their tree-stump dwelling and kept in a comfortable cage by unintentionally cruel people. Without the nourishment of freedom they may even perish. In the eyes of society, they may appear as obstinate eccentrics who do not know what is best for them, but--as the author shows--they are struggling to remain in the place where they may obtain the spiritual sustenance that no philanthropist can provide. Their escape from the Home demonstrates their final defiance of well-meaning authority and affirms that (to misquote the proverb) an herb dinner under one's own roof, however leaky, is preferable to a stalled ox in a Home for the Aged.

The beginning of "A Church Mouse"[8] seems to signal that the story is concerned primarily with women's rights in a humorous local setting. It involves an

argument between the heroine and the church deacon about the possibility of a woman's being sexton. Hetty, a notoriously disagreeable character, is even prepared to move into the meeting-house to prove her point. As the story progresses, however, the emphasis shifts to a conflict between a supposedly pious community and an old woman who needs a place to live. Deacon Gale is shown almost at once as being more concerned with getting in his hay-crop than with seeing that a homeless human being is given shelter. Again Mrs. Freeman uses the nature motif to underline the plight of her heroine. Hetty is "like a May-weed that had gathered a slender toughness through the long summer" (p. 408) and also like "a long-thorned brier among the beanpoles, or a fierce little animal with claws and teeth bared" (p. 416). Such comparisons present Hetty as a small wild thing struggling to survive in a community that regards her as if she were a weed or a rodent. She is despised for her uselessness and avoided because of her prickly disposition. Not only does Hetty stand, at the beginning of the story, as if she were a May-weed among the hay, but she persistently moves in front of the deacon, who is trying to ignore her while he rakes. His business is with hay, not weeds, although this one keeps annoying him. The comment that "Hetty kept standing herself about until he was forced to stop, or gather her in with the rowen hay" is significant, for it underlines the attitude of Deacon Gale. He wants no weeds in his crop--and no undesirables in his community. Through this simple but

subtle confrontation, the author reveals this churchman's lack of concern for one of his fellow parishioners. His indifferent attitude is echoed by the rest of the village. Door after door is shut against Hetty, and she is ironically amused at the excuses proffered: "Everybody's havin' company; I never see anything like it" (p. 412). She finally enlists the aid of the neighborhood idler, who obeys her instructions simply because it is less trouble to do so than to resist, and moves her belongings into the meeting-house.

Hetty enjoys a brief respite while she sets up her simple housekeeping, for she is left alone while the slow-thinking community recovers from the shock of her fait accompli. Not only does she perform the duties of sexton, but she also decorates the walls of the building with her bright "wool pictures" that have always been admired. Taken by themselves, these details may seem to reflect eccentricity. In the context of the story, however, they show the heroine as a small heroic figure determined, like the church mouse of the title, to find her own shelter even in the midst of indifferent or hostile surroundings. Hetty is striving to create a small area of independent existence for herself, even though the method she is employing is unconventional. Symbolically, her action represents the seeking of a dwelling-place in the house of the Lord, since she has found no welcome in the homes of men. Here is an implicit indictment of Christian charity supposedly upheld by such

people as Deacon Caleb Gale.

Having won the initial skirmish because of local inertia, Hetty unfortunately makes herself too obvious with cooking-odors that pervade the meeting-house. The congregation finally decides that she must be removed; the odor of boiling cabbage desecrates the sanctity of God's house. No one recognizes Hetty as an individual striving to maintain self-respect as a useful member of the community. Once their delicate noses are offended, Hetty's neighbors are as ruthless as the benevolent committee of "A Mistaken Charity" in their disposal of the pauper. Arrangements are made for her to live with a disagreeable and dominant woman who is looking for free household help. But Hetty, unwilling to be taken from the tiny home she has made for herself, locks the doors of the meeting-house against the village.

To reinforce her presentation of Hetty not as an eccentric but as a heroic figure besieged by enemies, Mrs. Freeman depicts the community as though it were a mob trying to break into the church and drive its victim out of holy sanctuary. In some ways the scene is comic, with the men dashing about trying to find keys that will unlock the door, and with Mrs. Deacon Gale continually giving directions in order to assert her authority. Yet the undercurrent is serious enough; if this mob does not intend actual physical violence toward Hetty, it nevertheless threatens her peaceful life and her small but self-sufficient existence. She is as wholly its potential victim as though

it were actually out for her blood, and she seems to have no more chance of being saved than would a church mouse being pursued by the exterminators. Here, as in "A Mistaken Charity," Mrs. Freeman is implying that the supposedly charitable members of society are in fact destructive to the freedom of the individual.

From her sanctuary Hetty pleads for the recognition that she is trying to establish: "Can't I stay here, nohow? It don't seem as if I could go to Mis' Radway's. . . . I s'pose she's a good woman, but she's used to havin' her own way, an' I've been livin' all my life with them that was, an' I've had to fight to keep a footin' on the earth, an' now I'm gittin' too old for't. . . . I ain't complainin', but I've always had a dretful hard time; seems as if now I might take a little comfort the last of it, if I could stay here"(p. 424). Hetty is defended by Mrs. Deacon Gale, one of the first to complain about the cabbage-odors. The author has prepared the way for this sudden change of heart. Mrs. Gale has been giving the men good advice as to how to get into the church, but she has been largely ignored. It is not too surprising to hear her reassuring Hetty that she can tay where she is; the deacon's wife has also found herself a lone voice in the midst of numerically superior forces, and possibly she is intended as a character who is finally able to sympathize with the old woman. Or, to be less charitable about her motives, she is seizing the opportunity to exert her authority once more. In either

case, she has enlisted herself on Hetty's side against the rest of the village, and such motivation makes her new attitude more convincing than it would have been had it arisen out of sentimental pity. Hetty is permitted to remain as sexton--and as a fully recognized citizen who has her own role to play in village society. She is no longer an outcast. At the end of the story she is found ringing the church bells on Christmas morning. This might seem a superfluous addition in order to make the tale a Christmas story, except that her act is also a celebration of her new-found joy and her desire to share it with others. By locking the villagers out of the meeting-house, she had effectively condemned their lack of Christian charity; they were unfit to enter the place of worship. By recognizing her worth as a person, they have manifested true charity toward her, and she is now expressing her gratitude by inviting them to come to church and share with her the celebration of this holy feast.

Confrontations between society and so-called eccentric individuals occur in other stories. In "Christmas Jenny" (A New England Nun), the old woman who lives in the woods is regarded with suspicion because she keeps birds and small animals in cages. Although she is only tending sick or wounded creatures until they are well enough to be free, she is accused of cruelty to her charges. Her wilderness existence sustains and fulfils her; she is not crazy but rather shrewd and sensible. She stands out in contrast

to her weak-willed and silly neighbor, Mrs. Carey, who is totally unfit to cope with her husband's temper tantrums. It is in fact Jenny who is able to deal with Jonas Carey whenever he indulges in a fit of sulkiness after having been thwarted. And it is Jenny who has taken into her home a deaf-mute orphan whom no one else wanted. Her way of life reflects love and compassion for both wild creatures and human beings. I cannot agree with Westbrook that she "would have been better off if the authorities had retained their purpose sufficiently to commit her to an asylum."[9]

Similarly, "Bouncing Bet"[10] tells of an old woman who is considered an undesirable member of society because she fails to live up to the strict housekeeping standards of her neighbors. Her dilapidated and neglected house is symbolic of her own physical condition. She and the dwelling are together surrendering themselves to the inexorable passing of time, and she exists in a dim and peaceful atmosphere until interrupted by the neighbors, who are disturbed by her untidy housekeeping. Unable to convince them that she would be better off if left alone, old Ann Lyman runs upstairs and hides in a feather mattress, nearly smothering. Symbolically she is retreating even further into the house of which she is so much a part. To uproot her from her home and her memories would be a kind of murder--a well-meant but fatal separation of the entity that Ann plus her house has become.

The so-called charitable motives for wishing to

place both Jenny and Ann in institutions are shown by the author to conceal a wish to get rid of these nonconformists. In particular, the atmosphere of "Christmas Jenny" suggests a witch-hunt, with ugly whispers spreading through the village and the sombrely clad minister and deacon setting forth to judge the old woman. "Bouncing Bet" presents a self-appointed village improvement committee who is planning to dispose of an unsightly and ramshackle dwelling and, incidentally, its inhabitant. Such charity is concerned only with external appearances and with behavior that does not conform to accepted standards. That it is possible for the poor to be sustained through spiritual benefits does not occur to these people who are determined to do <u>their</u> good to others.

In other tales, we find that the heroine who has escaped the unwanted benevolence of society may have inadvertently opened her door to other threats to her integrity. Although she may exhibit heroic fortitude in resisting philanthropic pressures, she may be the victim of other social forces that interact with them. True neuroticism, which Mrs. Freeman recognizes and deprecates, should be distinguished from the nonconforming attitude that goes against established customs from a desire to maintain self-respect. The heroines already discussed in this chapter, such as Harriet Shattuck and Hetty Fifield, may appear odd in the eyes of the community in which they live, but the author shows that their behavior is necessary in order to

uphold their worth as autonomous individuals rather than as dependent paupers. Other Freeman protagonists, however, possess attitudes that seriously curtail their freedom and their ability to enjoy life. The problem confronting Mrs. Freeman is that of keeping her central characters in a sympathetic light and accentuating their heroic attributes even when they are behaving in a neurotic fashion. Critics tend to overlook the way in which she distinguishes between attitudes that maintain personal integrity and attitudes that limit it. Yet some of her protagonists, in their reaction against the stigma of poverty, manifest both heroism and neuroticism.

"Old Lady Pingree" (A Humble Romance) introduces a heroine who reacts both favorably and unfavorably to the pressures exerted upon her. Nancy is the last survivor of a once-prominent family and is now forced to accept some charity in order to survive. She is permitted to live rent-free in what was once her own home; she is given food by the neighbors, since her meagre income from the sale of eggs and knitting is insufficient to support her. She exerts her personality sufficiently, however, to ensure that nothing is directly offered to her. The basket must be left discreetly behind the door, and the benefactor must make a proper social call; otherwise Nancy will accept nothing. Rather than being a passive, grateful recipient of charity, she exercises enough control to remain in a small way mistress of the situation. Her self-respect is

maintained in a more subtle way than Harriet Shattuck's tough-doughnut policy, but the motivation is much the same.

To ensure that Nancy's carefully-kept façade of independence is seen not as eccentric but as a necessary defense against the label of pauper, Mrs. Freeman first of all infuses symbolic meaning into her physical description of the heroine. She concentrates on details that emphasize dignity rather than odd or comic attributes: "She was lame in one hip; but, for all that, there was a certain poor majesty in her carriage. . . . She held her head erect, and wore an odd black lace turban. She had made the turban herself, with no pattern. It was a direct outcome of her own individuality; perched on the top of her long old head it really was--Nancy Pingree" (pp. 148-149). This description suggests positive qualities that have triumphed over adversity. Despite poverty and illness Nancy has managed to hold herself erect physically and psychologically, rather than drooping beneath her burdens. The necessity of making her own headgear brings out her creativity; again, this is a positive way of treating facts that might simply have contributed toward a caricature. The turban is odd (in the sense of being individual) but of a sombre and fine material, and the same might be said of its wearer.

The representatives of charitable society in this story are not actively seeking to take Nancy from her home. Yet they are suggested as having attitudes that could rob her of her precious sense of recognition as a respected member of society. Mrs. Holmes, the Deacon's wife, has a

"carefully and coolly calculated" benevolence; she is somewhat like the worthy Mrs. Simonds of "A Mistaken Charity." It is Mrs. Holmes who advises her husband to make certain of his hold on the Pingree homestead: "You'd better foreclose . . . and make sure you've got the place safe in your own hands; an' then you'd better let the poor old lady stay there just the same as long as she lives. She needn't know any difference" (p. 153). This seemingly charitable gesture is undercut in two ways. First, Mrs. Holmes's slighting remark that the poor old lady will not know the difference implies an insensitivity to Nancy's need for dignity; it reduces her to the level of a senile pauper. In addition, there is an ironic twist in having the Deacon and his wife play roles that--except for the overlay of charity--are normally undertaken by villains. Such a reversal places the motives of this good couple in a dubious perspective; they seem most concerned with acquiring the property. As the victim of condescending benevolence with overtones of avarice, Nancy stands forth as justified in struggling against the humiliating position forced upon her. In pretending that the basket of food behind the door does not exist, she is playing a part that helps to sustain her self-respect.

Thus far the stories discussed have presented protagonists whose pride, which may be defined here as a desire for self-esteem and dignity, has been shown as morally justifiable. But in "Old Lady Pingree" a more

complex situation exists. Nancy is acted upon not only by the psychological pressures of poverty but also by a more subtle element--her aristocratic background. These influences do not work independently; they interact, for Nancy's resistance to charity is intensified by the humiliating awareness of the social level to which she has fallen. Her feeling of responsibility toward family tradition forces her to summon additional powers of resistance against being called a pauper. Her dislike of being compelled to accept charity, coupled with her strong family pride, has both positive and negative effects upon her. In order to ascertain which of her reactions to this situation are heroic (or life-sustaining) and which are neurotic (or life-limiting), it is necessary to take a close look at the structure of the story.

Some aspects of Nancy's family pride seem to be beneficial. The initial description of the heroine includes references to her majesty and stateliness, attributes signifying not only upright posture but also aristocratic traits. Since Mrs. Freeman is treating Nancy with dignity rather than caricaturing her, it may be assumed that these allusions to nobility are deliberate; they signal that Nancy's awareness of her Pingree heritage assists her in maintaining an "upright" attitude before the world. Her poignant statement as she stands before the window, "I wish I could see somebody comin' that belonged to me," further justifies her attitude (p. 148). The lack of any living

relatives, coupled with an evident need for someone who "belongs to her," has compelled her to turn toward her dead family for identification and moral support. They continue to live on through her, and she in turn must live up to them.

A more dubious aspect of this family pride emerges from the presence of a small hoard of money that Nancy has managed to put aside in order that she may be buried like a Pingree and not like a pauper. The money lies untouched, while the old woman exists from day to day in a condition just short of starvation. To deny herself physical comforts so relentlessly for the sake of the Pingree name is carrying family loyalty rather far. This manifestation of Nancy's pride in her people, a reaction that subordinates life to death, is deprecated by the author in her description of the cemetery in which the Pingrees lie:

> The old graves were green, and many little bushes were flowering around them. The gold-green leaf-buds on the weeping-willows were unfolding. The Pingree lot, however, partook of none of the general lightness and loveliness. No blessing of spring had fallen on that long rank of dead Pingrees. There they lay . . . each covered with a flat white stone above the grave mould. . . . In the midst of the cemetery, where gloom was now rendered tender by the infinite promise of the spring, the whole was a ghastly parallelogram of hopeless death.
>
> (p. 158)

This is more than a sensitively handled description of a New England graveyard; it shows the ability of Mrs. Freeman to

use regional material to make a serious point. Most of the burial ground reflects the transposition of death into life and beauty, but the Pingree lot maintains a grim emphasis on the dead and on their power to stifle living things. Nancy's life has been suppressed; so influenced is she by the presence of her dead ancestors that she is willing to sacrifice what few comforts she might enjoy in order to be buried in a manner befitting a Pingree. Her chief pleasure in life seems to lie in the anticipation of the fine funeral she will have at the end of it. While her dedication to <u>living</u> like a Pingree is commendable, since it enables her to retain self-esteem as a dignified person, her preoccupation with <u>dying</u> like a Pingree is neurotic.

Mrs. Freeman does a great deal to relieve the morbid implications of Nancy's attitude. She presents her heroine as practical and unemotional as she gives directions about her funeral to the Deacon's wife: "In case anything happened to me, you'd probably be one to come in an' see to things, an' you'd want to know where everything was, so you could put your hand on it. Well, all the clothes you'd need are right there, folded up in that drawer. . . . In this corner, under the clothes, you'll find the money to pay for my buryin'. . . . I want to be put in that vacant place at the end of the Pingree lot, an' have a flat stone, like the others" (pp. 151-152). Later, the author follows up her graveyard

description with a shift to Nancy's own point of view as she regards the family plot. For her it is "the most attractive lot in the cemetery. Its singularity had been in subtle accordance with the Pingree character, and she was a Pingree" (p. 158). The complacent way in which Nancy views her future resting-place is comparable to the anticipation of her arrival at a long-delayed family reunion. Nancy's preoccupation with her burial is also given softer overtones by the delicate touch of symbolism at the beginning and end of the story. The setting is a winter landscape, cold and bleak like the everyday life of the heroine, yet with the gold of sunset behind it that represents a final blaze of grandeur. Some of this radiance is cast backward upon her; Nancy is able to enjoy some psychological warmth at the thought of the future celebration, her final triumph over her charitable and condescending neighbors.

But modifying the neurotic side of Nancy's closeness to her family does not do away with its limiting influence upon her life. Nancy has, in effect, put her life away in that bureau drawer; she finds little pleasure in her daily existence except for her anticipation of death. Mrs. Freeman introduces a moral crisis for her heroine in which this obsession with Pingree dignity is tested. Nancy's lodger dies, and the dead woman's daughter, who is as poor and as proud as Nancy herself, goes into near-hysteria at the thought of having to give her mother

a pauper's funeral. After a struggle with herself, Nancy gives her burial money to Jenny with the brave if untrue statement, "This ain't all; I've got some more." The living has, for the moment, triumphed over the dead; because of her concern for Jenny, the old woman is able to subdue the powerful sense of responsibility toward her ancestors. "She took on so, I couldn't help it," she tells Mrs. Holmes. "It come over me that I hadn't got anybody to feel bad ef I was buried by the town, an' it wouldn't make so much difference" (p. 159). By realizing that living people can "feel bad" but that the dead are indifferent, Nancy finds her life momentarily enriched. She is able to free herself in part from the morbid side of her preoccupation with her family; she sacrifices the money, but she gains the affectionate gratitude of Jenny. A sincere, if somewhat reserved, friendship is born between these two proud women; Nancy is able, for the moment, to enjoy the companionship of someone who almost "belongs to her." Yet Jenny decides to get married, so that Nancy is once more left alone.

The end of the story contains some clumsy manipulations. Nancy's money is restored to her, presumably as an authorial reward for her great sacrifice; the Pingree property increases in value, and the Deacon decides to "make her a little present"--perhaps to ease his conscience. In addition, Mrs. Freeman finds it necessary to hint that Nancy's renewed hopes of a grand funeral really stand for

the old woman's anticipation of immortality. Such a possibility is not borne out by anything previously found in the story; Nancy is more concerned with joining her family in the cemetery. Mrs. Freeman seems fearful of allowing the story to stand by itself, with her heroine frankly shown as reacting both positively and negatively to the pressures of her environment. At the end, the balance is restored with the final words of Nancy as she watches Jenny and her lover stroll past: "I wonder . . . if they are any happier thinkin' about gettin' married than I am thinkin' about gettin' buried?" (p. 163). The morbidity of the situation is lessened by the dry New England humor and by Nancy's evident contentment, but the Pingrees still have the last word. If their presence has assisted Nancy in maintaining a proud posture before the community, it has also limited her happiness. It is not essential to decide whether Nancy's neuroticism outweighs her heroism, or vice versa; it is necessary, however, to see her as a character whose reactions to poverty and loss of social status contain both fulfilling and destructive elements.

Another heroine who is in part a victim of her environment is Martha Patch of "An Honest Soul" (A Humble Romance). Martha is able to maintain her independence by sewing for the neighbors. Like her parents before her, she has worked and saved all her life in order to keep at bay the threat of debts and mortgages that might engulf

the family property. Her father had such a horror of debt that he never finished the dwelling in which they lived; Martha has lived all her days in "a little fragment of a house on the big, sorry lot of land" (p. 79).

Martha's existence in the shadow of the almshouse might cause her to appear a pitiable old woman who would be better off in some charitable institution. Mrs. Freeman, however, begins the story by showing her heroine complacently surveying her prospects and counting her meagre blessings: "I'll get a dollar for both of them quilts, an' thar'll be two dollars. I've got a dollar and sixty-three cents on hand now, an' thar's plenty of meal an' merlasses, an' some salt fish an' pertaters in the house. I'll get along middlin' well, I reckon" (p. 78). Readers who might shudder at the prospect of a diet of salt fish, potatoes, and corn-meal porridge should keep in mind that this was part of the New England rural diet, and not necessarily evidence of stark poverty. It is not as though she is forced to live on crusts; in comparison with Nancy Pingree's larder, Martha's is well stocked. Despite the pressures involved in keeping her property free of mortgages, she manages to retain a positive and even cheerful attitude toward her future. She does not indulge in self-pity.

If Martha is not shown as an unhappy old pauper, neither is her dwelling described as a place of misery and squalor:

> The eight-day clock on the mantel ticked peacefully. It was a queer old timepiece,

> which had belonged to her grandmother Patch. A painting of a quaint female, with puffed hair and a bunch of roses, adorned the front of it, under the dial-plate. It was flanked on either side by tall, green vases. There was a dull-colored rag carpet of Martha's own manufacture on the floor of the room. Some wooden chairs stood around stiffly; an old, yellow map of Massachusetts and a portrait of George Washington hung on the walls. There was not a speck of dust anywhere, nor any disorder.
>
> (pp. 85-86)

This description, first of all, has the effect of a charming early New England interior in the more humble tradition. It has also deeper implications. Through the map and portrait it points to the history of America, and through the vases and the elaborate clock it hints at palmier times in Martha's own ancestry. These details suggest that if Martha has come down in the world from the status of the quaint female with the puffed hair, she has nevertheless maintained the independence that inspired the beginnings of her country. Martha's self-sufficiency is given a further favorable perspective.

Like Nancy Pingree, Martha is simultaneously affected by the pressures of poverty and of family background, although in a slightly different way. The ever-present threat of losing her independence brings out her qualities of fortitude; she is able to maintain a heroic stance as a self-respecting and useful member of the community. Her attitude is reinforced by the "finely strained honesty" that she has apparently inherited from

her father. The late Mr. Patch might have been used to illustrate the "rigid New England plan" that Austin Warren sees as typical of Mrs. Freeman's region: "It is immoral 'to be beholden' to anyone. Loans, gifts and charity are not to be accepted. What one can't pay for in cash or reciprocity of services rendered . . . one goes without."[11] So determined is Martha to owe nothing to anyone that she nearly dies of overwork and starvation in order to finish piecing two quilts before accepting payment for them. Normally she would have completed the task within a short time, but on this occasion she inadvertently mixes the patchwork pieces and has to rip the work apart twice before it is finally assembled properly. Her vow, "I'll hev them quilts right ef it kills me!" (p. 85) is ironic, for it very nearly fulfils itself. Martha's extreme scrupulosity is evident in two ways: she will not ask for advance payment for what she has not yet finished, and she will not compromise her standards by returning the quilts without rectifying her mistake. Quilt pieces--scraps of left-over material--are relatively trivial items of little intrinsic worth; it is unlikely that the accidental exchange of the calico patches would have made much difference to either of the women who sent the work to Martha. But the old woman is inflexible; Mis' Bennet's patches must be put in Mis' Bennet's quilt, despite the temptation to overlook the mistake. "She won't say nothin', an' she'll pay me, but she'll feel it inside, an' it won't be doin' the squar' thing by her. No; if I'm goin' to airn money I'll airn it"

(p. 82). Martha's ordeal, culminating in her collapse--after the quilts are finished--illustrates her powers of endurance, powers that have sustained her throughout her life. Yet the mettle she shows here can scarcely be called heroic in the sense of augmenting and enriching her existence. Her fortitude is misdirected; she risks her life for a few scraps of cloth.

The author's direct comment about the morality of this ordeal by quilting is noncommittal: "It is a hard question to decide, whether there were any real merit in such finely strained honesty, or whether it were merely a case of morbid conscientiousness. Perhaps the old woman, inheriting very likely her father's scruples, had had them so intensified by age and childishness that they had become a little off the bias of reason" (p. 86). Mrs. Freeman seems to be aware of the difficulty in distinguishing between heroism and neuroticism, particularly as Martha is exhibiting one of the cardinal New England virtues, absolute honesty. Indeed, sentimental readers might applaud the courage of this woman who was willing to die rather than to compromise her principles.

Mrs. Freeman makes her own view explicit through her symbolic development of her heroine's single-mindedness. First, the tedious project of assembling and then ripping apart quilt pieces emphasizes Martha's fussiness about making every little part of her existence fit into a pattern of scrupulous honesty. By holding her work so close

to her eyes, she obscures the larger view; she forgets that her sewing is supposed to enable her to live, not to kill her. The author also uses the motif of the back window to further her presentation of Martha's overconscientious behavior. Virtually imprisoned in her tiny dwelling--the one part of the house that her father did complete--Martha must observe life through its single window; her father's attitude toward debt has restricted her both physically and psychologically. With the painful concentration of a prisoner, she studies the few evidences of life that she can see: a bird nesting, children going to and from school, cattle browsing in the adjoining pasture. The solace she finds in nature is limited; she is more often worrying if the children are late, or speculating as to whether a certain green spot in the meadow shows that "somethin's buried thar." This strained and often morbid way of viewing the world has its counterpart in the strict intensity with which she interprets the standards of honesty she has been taught. Her back-window outlook on life extends to her moral principles.

The only positive side of Martha's misdirected suffering is the small triumph she evinces in revealing her experience to no one. Delivering her quilts, she listens with wry satisfaction to Mrs. Bennet's innocent comment, "How pretty that calico did work in" (p. 89). Mrs. Bennet will never know what that pretty calico nearly cost the old woman. There is a suggestion here of a feeling of superior-

ity on Martha's part, a pride in being able to endure hardships without complaint. Yet surely her life has enough difficulties without her deliberately manufacturing extra ones. Her self-imposed martyrdom does no good, either to others or to herself.

Martha Patch's resistance to poverty is commendable, but her grim dedication to owing nothing to anyone remains as a severe limitation upon her. At the end of the story, a neighbor offers to cut a front window in the little cottage. This may seem evidence of an authorial desire to compensate the heroine for her sufferings; yet in the context of the back-window motif, this happy ending becomes ironic. Martha's physical outlook on the world may be broadened, but there is no evidence of any corresponding change in her narrow moral views. Like Nancy Pingree, she remains to some extent a prisoner of the past.

In these last two stories, Mrs. Freeman demonstrates that both heroism and neuroticism may exist in the same individual. She presents a more complex view than critics have recognized; they are prone to label her protagonists as essentially normal or abnormal. Certain pressures, such as poverty, may be opposed in such a way that the heroine is able to retain some self-respect and pride. Other pressures, such as those emerging from her family background, may augment the heroism by helping the protagonist to maintain her upright stand. On the other hand, the interaction of social forces may produce a

reaction that severely limits the heroine's existence. Old Lady Pingree is too preoccupied with the anticipation of her funeral, and Martha is too busy sorting quilt patches, to be able to place personal well-being in the right perspective. They are both relatively content in having achieved a certain measure of victory over circumstances, but their obsessions shut them off from a broader enjoyment of life.

Mrs. Freeman does not stress the physical deprivations of poverty as the major hardships her heroines must endure. Indeed, she demonstrates that run-down cottages and scanty diets are largely irrelevant if the individual is able to achieve a contented existence in spite of them. Some of her central characters experience satisfaction in having attained sufficient independence and self-respect to escape the label of pauper. Others extract solace from their closeness to nature, achieving a spiritual serenity that compensates for their lack of material goods. Mrs. Freeman's implicit metaphor in many of these tales of poverty is that of a "sanctuary" achieved by the individual who has triumphed, in whole or in part, over the unfavorable psychological aspects of poverty. This sanctuary is usually a private dwelling-place, a home of one's own that may be inspired also by nature, by the past, or by the presence of God. Christmas Jenny's wilderness cottage, Ann Lyman's memory-haunted dwelling, and Hetty Fifield's corner of the meeting-house are examples of such places.

To be removed from one's shelter is to risk losing the spiritual sustenance necessary for happiness. The well-meaning and benevolent characters in these stories often threaten to effect such a separation by removing these fugitives from charity to a "good" home. In order to underline her condemnation of the superficial doing-good that is concerned only with bestowing material benefits upon the poor, Mrs. Freeman attributes to these benefactors motives and roles more suited to prison warders, witch-hunters, or outright villains. And even if these people are not actively seeking to wrest their victims from sanctuary, they effectively spurn them through condescension and indifference. To allow the poor to live in their midst as second-class citizens is scarcely less demeaning than to tidy them out of sight in institutions. Mrs. Freeman's charitable community leaders never consider bestowing upon the poor the greatest gift of all--compassionate recognition of their needs as individuals. Although the efforts of Mrs. Freeman's characters to assert themselves may appear at times to be trivial or eccentric, such struggles are only the outward signs of an inner determination to retain self-respect and integrity in the midst of well-intentioned but often destructive benevolence.

NOTES

Epigraph: Walden and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 1950), pp. 66-67.

[1] "In the Grey Cabins of New England," Century, 49 (February 1895), 621.

[2] Religion and the Rise of Capitalism: A Historical Study (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1926), p.267.

[3] Quoted in Herbert Ross Brown, The Sentimental Novel in America, 1789-1860 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1940), p. 362.

[4] Davis, 621.

[5] Martin, p. 149.

[6] Brooks, p. 469.

[7] Included in A Humble Romance and Other Stories (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1887). All further citations to A Humble Romance will be to this text.

[8] Included in A New England Nun and Other Stories (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1891). All further citations to A New England Nun will be to this text.

[9] Acres of Flint: Writers of Rural New England, 1870-1900 (Washington, D. C.: Scarecrow Press, 1951), p. 76.

[10] Included in Understudies (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1901).

[11] Warren, p. 159.

CHAPTER II

> The Mohammedan and Mormon doctrines are that women have no life in the next world except through their husbands. The Christian doctrine is that they have none in this.
>
> --Mary A. Dodge

In nineteenth-century America, matrimony was considered one of the most blessed institutions of mankind. Family life was thought to lie at the very foundation of national unity; the hearthstone became a sacred altar, with the revered wife and mother as its patron saint. This attitude is well illustrated in the opening sentences of a popular bridal gift-book of the period: "The family is a divine institution. God setteth the solitary in families. By the sacred tie of marriage he joins together the man and the woman, whom he created for that end. . . . The Lord God having created and prepared the earth as the abode of the human family, and having made man in his own image, gave to him, for companionship, for fellowship, for the exercise of mutual, pure, and ardent love, one less capable of physical endurance, but more gentle, and fitted the better to minister to his rougher nature."[1] It was assumed that if any woman were to attain her proper

place in life, she must marry and raise a family.

Although the women's rights movement of the period urged that the female role be extended beyond the domestic sphere, it did not necessarily imply that the domestic role should be done away with altogether. The majority of feminists advocated more freedom for women within the matrimonial state. (Only a few renegades, such as the demure Mrs. Victoria Woodhull, hinted at the possibility of free love outside marriage.) That a woman could lead a fulfilled existence without a husband and children--or without a lover--was an idea quite alien to even the most radical feminist minds.

The literature of the nineteenth century is not particularly kind to the spinster, who is generally shown as a comic or grotesque figure whose unfulfilled life expresses itself in various eccentricities. One may think of Jane Austen's garrulous Miss Bates; Dickens's Miss Flyte, Miss Havisham, and Rosa Dartle, none of them quite sane; Hawthorne's pitiful Hepzibah Pyncheon; Twain's Miss Watson and Melville's Aunt Charity, prime examples of narrow-minded piety; and Mrs. Stowe's collection of rigid, righteous, duty-ridden New England spinsters, from Miss Ophelia of Uncle Tom's Cabin to the grim assemblage in Oldtown Folks. Brown comments, "Women novelists, usually alert for opportunities to dignify female character, neglected to add the lovable maiden aunt to their gallery of exemplary wives and model mothers."[2] Neither male nor female writers were

inclined to think of the old maid as anything but a pitiable creature. The one exception I have found is the attractive and dignified Miss Jeanette of Fenimore Cooper's The Spy.

Even today, society tends to look sidewise at the spinster. She is made the subject of countless jokes about sexual frustration; such humor is extended to include the advocates of women's liberation, who are supposedly militant because they are unable to attract male attention. Having failed to get a husband, the old maid is thought to suffer from what W. H. Auden calls "the distortions of ingrown virginity."[3] In his "Let Me Tell You a Little Story," Auden has made his own contribution to the list of literary spinsters with Miss Edith Gee, a pathetic little prude who dies of cancer and has her modesty violated on the dissecting-table. This prejudice against the old maid has apparently limited the ability of some critics to evaluate the unmarried heroines in the fiction of Mary Wilkins Freeman. Westbrook, for example, accuses the New England Nun and her sisters of a neurotic "passivity" because they have no inclination to marry.[4] Foster interprets the story of the Nun as a flat authorial condemnation of the heroine's choice of a single life.[5] Our literary traditions are, of course, mainly concerned with heroines who exist only for love and marriage. It is not easy to become reconciled to a story in which the real heroine is the woman who does not marry at the end.

Mrs. Freeman reverses the conventional view of the

spinster much as she did that of the pauper. Her old maids are taken out of the usual context of pitiable eccentricity and are treated instead as individuals defending themselves against a society that expects them to marry, even though matrimony may be detrimental to their psychological well-being. The spinster heroine must struggle against social opposition in two ways. Within herself, she must unlearn the lesson that society tries to impress upon her--that without marriage her life is meaningless, unless she dedicates herself to a second-best compromise such as piety or good works. Confronting society, she must face those who are ready to ridicule or pity her for her failure to get married.

Generally, Mrs. Freeman presents society as more preoccupied with marriage as an ideal state than sensitive to the needs of the individual. She demonstrates that some of her heroines may well be better off single than married to their suitors. Such is her answer to the classic prayer of the stereotyped old maid: "Any man, dear Lord, will do." And, just as she shows that poverty and contentment are not necessarily mutually exclusive, she presents heroines who dare to be happy even though they are, matrimonially speaking, destitute.

For example, Maria in "Two Old Lovers" (A Humble Romance) is shown in an unusual way, considering that she is the sweetheart of a dilatory man who never quite gets around to proposing even after twenty-five years of courtship.

Far from being described as a desolate, pitiable creature, Maria is "literally bubbling over with jollity. Round-faced and black-eyed, with a funny little bounce of her whole body when she walked, she was the merry feature of the whole place" (p. 28). This is very different from the picture of the traditionally thin, rigid spinster whose very bearing reflects her emotionally starved existence. Further, Maria is set forth as quite capable of enjoying her own life apart from her slow-moving David. "She was too cheerful, too busy, and too much interested in her daily duties to fret much about anything. There was never at any time much of the sentimental element in her composition, and her feeling for David was eminently practical in its nature" (p. 32). Even the way in which Maria "bounces" as she walks suggests a resiliency of character that does not fit the conventional image of the mournful old maid.

The village society, organized around a shoe factory, is firmly fixed in its grooves of custom. The author points out, with a touch of irony: "They too had begun to drone a little like the factories. . . . Every morning at seven the old men, young men, and boys . . . filed unquestioningly out of the back doors of the white cottages, treading still deeper the well-worn foot-paths stretching around the sides of the houses" (p. 26). And the minds of these people follow the same sort of conventional patterns: "Leyden folks all thought that David Emmons would marry Maria Brewster when her father died.

'David can rent his house, and go to live with Maria and her mother,' said they, with an affectionate readiness to arrange matters for them. But he did not. . . . He manifested not the slightest intention of carrying out people's judicious plans for his welfare and Maria's" (p. 28). By portraying Leydenites in a humdrum, droning context, as though they were insects carrying out their unthinking duties toward the hive or anthill, Mrs. Freeman raises doubts about the proposed union they so automatically take for granted. They are trying to fit Maria and David into their conforming pattern of existence, in which "men worked peacefully and evenly in the shoe-shops all day; and the women stayed at home and kept the little white cottages tidy, cooked the meals, and washed the clothes, and did the sewing" (p. 27). Leyden is unable to break free of its conditioned responses to a courtship, and the irony of the story lies in their total failure to perceive that David and Maria are not really sweethearts in the traditional sense.

The real situation soon emerges; the love affair suggested by the title is transformed into a more complex and subtle relationship. Romance gives way to Maria's maternal affection for an innocently childish old man who has for such a long time postponed the responsibility of putting an end--in one way or another--to a meaningless courtship. This change in emphasis is illustrated through the motif of the two weekly visits. David expresses his

affection for Maria through his regular call upon her, an empty ritual whose significance has long since departed. Maria's visits to her lover's dwelling are for the purpose of bringing him home-cooked meals and doing some of his housecleaning. Her attentions to him are a practical manifestation of her affection; they contribute to his well-being and also help to fulfil her maternal feelings toward him. His attentions to her, on the other hand, mean very little to either of them, unless they leave Maria with a heightened sense of the futility of such mechanical visits. The poignancy of the situation lies not so much in Maria's situation as a disappointed woman as in the partial frustration of her protective yearnings. "She, although the woman, had the stronger character of the two, and there was something rather mother-like than lover-like in her affection for him. It was through the protecting care which chiefly characterized her love that the only pain to her came from their long courtship and postponement of marriage" (p. 32).

David is not depicted as much of a matrimonial prize. That he lacks vitality is suggested not only by his painful slowness (he is ridiculed even by the plodding Leydenites) but also by his bland diet of greens and vegetables; he evinces a faint resemblance to an old horse moving always in the same tracks. David is not just a New England village character; the author has drawn him with a few touches that evoke sympathy rather than ridicule.

"David heard the chaffing . . . but he took it all in good part. He would laugh at himself with the rest, but there was something touching in his deprecatory way of saying sometimes, 'Well, I don't know how 'tis, but it don't seem to be in my natur' to do any other way. . . . You'll have to git behind and push me a leetle, I reckon'" (p. 29). Yet such a figure is incongruous as a romantic hero; he is more plausible as the object of Maria's maternal devotion.

Maria's triumph over the pressures of spinsterhood consists in not being unduly influenced by the point of view that marriage is the only happy state for a woman. Had she given in to the prevalent attitude of Leyden and concentrated only on David's eventual proposal, her life would have been miserable. As it is, she refuses to follow the role of a forsaken woman. She is active rather than passive; she makes a positive contribution to her lover's comfort. Her protectiveness is not focused upon him exclusively but is extended to include the affectionate support of a childish and feeble old mother. Maria is a vital and cheerful woman who enjoys mothering other people; her chief regret concerning David is that she cannot really look after him properly, since she is not his wife. Mrs. Freeman shows her heroine giving way now and then to sadness but emphasizes that the regret is mainly for David's sake. Maria does not indulge in the more self-centred sentimental heartbreak of the lonely old maid.

I do not agree with Westbrook that Maria "has

displayed excessive patience and devotion that in themselves are abnormalities."[6] Of all the people in Leyden, Maria alone is demonstrated to be extremely sensible in a society bound by ant-like rituals. The amount of time spent at the beginning of the story in describing the physical structure of Leyden sets up a framework of conformity that serves as the foundation of "Two Old Lovers." The details about the village are not irrelevant. "A built his cottage like C, and B built his like D. They painted them white, and hung the green blinds, and laid out their flower-beds in front and their vegetable-beds at the back" (p. 26). This description reveals the lack of individuality that prevails throughout the community. The point of the story is that Maria avoids the social conditioning of the anthill and, rather than devoting her life entirely and neurotically to David, continues to exist as a person in her own right.

Another early tale of a spinster who achieves a measure of happiness is "A Symphony in Lavender" (A Humble Romance), which I mention here as a prelude to the discussion of "A New England Nun." Certain features of the latter and better developed story appear in the earlier one.

From its title, this story would lead the reader to anticipate a deserted old maid who has laid her love affair away in a lavender-scented bureau drawer, and Mrs. Freeman at times comes dangerously near to producing this effect. Yet the heroine, Caroline Munson, does not play the usual part of a recluse devoted to her past love. Like

Maria, she is involved in prosaic daily chores, such as going for the milk. Rather than hiding from people, she enjoys entertaining; in the words of a neighbor, she has "a sort of mania for asking folks to tea." In appearance she is no faded beauty, but simply "a woman of forty, fair and pleasing." This restrained treatment signals that the everyday activities of the heroine take precedence over her role as a lonely spinster.

The motif of lilac (or lavender) pervades the story--a little too obviously. Miss Caroline wears lavender gowns, old-fashioned in cut but dainty and well-kept. She is compared to a lilac blossom: "there was the same dull bloom about her, and a shy, antiquated grace" (p. 41). The attributes of the lilac are applied not only to the heroine but also to her dwelling. It is surrounded by lilacs. Further, its interior reveals the same "dull bloom" and "antiquated grace" already mentioned. "There was not one vivid tint in that parlor; everything had the dimness of age over it. . . . Large shadowy figures sprawled over the floor, their indistinctness giving them the suggestion of grace, and the polish on the mahogany furniture was too dull to reflect the light. The gilded scrolls on the wall-paper no longer shone, and over some of the old engravings on the walls a half-transparent film that looked like mist had spread. Outside, a cool green shadow lay over the garden, and soft, lazy puffs of lilac-scented air came in at the windows" (pp. 41-42). In a sense, Miss

Caroline has laid her household away in lavender; she has preserved the past in her dress and in her surroundings. Yet her windows are open to the fresh air and to the rest of the world.

Mrs. Freeman seems to have intended this old-fashioned atmosphere to suggest serenity and peace, although the positive side of her description is somewhat compromised by the association between film and dust. This unfortunate choice of words should not be allowed to obscure the careful setting forth of images that are evocative not of decay but of a dimness that retains its own "dull bloom." Miss Caroline's life blends past and present. She keeps her antique furnishings polished, even if the wax she uses is "too dull to reflect the light." In other words, she imposes her own personality upon these relics of the past, establishing order through her daily routine. Further, she makes other people welcome in her home, so that they may share the dim richness of her existence. One weakness in this story is the author's reliance upon her first person narrator, who is apparently meant as an objective observer rather than an integrated character. This narrator's presentation is uneven; sometimes she is objectively reporting what happens, and at other times she is sentimental and impressionable, making gushing remarks such as "Oh, it was all lovely, and it was so little trouble to enjoy it" (p. 42). This inconsistency makes it more difficult to assess the author's own attitude

toward Miss Caroline.

This heroine chose to remain single; because of her decision, Westbrook calls her emotionally immature and afraid of marriage.[7] On one level, sexual fear seems to have motivated her. She recounts an experience she had in her youth involving a prophetic dream in which she met a young man. When he asked her to give him a lily, her reaction was ambivalent: "I wanted at once to give him the lily and would have died rather than give it to him, and I turned and fled, with my basket of flowers and my dove on my shoulder" (p. 45). When the man actually enters her life, she experiences the same revulsion and sends him away. The sexual implications of this dream are surprisingly explicit, considering the period in which the story was written. At the end the author attempts to gloss over the situation by hinting that Miss Caroline's lover was an immoral person, and that she was wise in heeding the warning of the dream and giving him up. But the precise moral character of the suitor is irrelevant. Rather than facing the realities of marriage, Miss Caroline chose spinsterhood.

Mrs. Freeman does not avoid recognizing that Miss Caroline's decision has limited her enjoyment of life. The heroine herself admits the possibility that she made a mistake: "Now I want to know . . . if you think that my dream was sent to me as a warning, or that I fancied it all, and wrecked--no, I won't say wrecked--dulled the happiness of my whole life for a nervous whim?" (p. 47). If her dream

was the result of an unconscious revulsion against physical love, it might indeed have been a warning, although not in the sense either Miss Caroline or her visitor understands it. There is a suggestion at the end of the story that this suitor became a famous but notoriously immoral artist, and that Miss Caroline made the right choice in sending him away. This resolution seems contrived and gratuitous, for it does not really matter whether the lover represented a specific sexual threat because of his own particular personality, or whether any man would have elicited the same response in the heroine. Perhaps the author wanted to gloss over the idea that Miss Caroline was averse to sex in case such a motif was too frank for her readers or her editors.

On the other hand, this story is a subtle defense of a woman who refuses to believe that marriage is the only way in which she could find happiness. Miss Caroline's choice of words--she has dulled her joy in life, but has not wrecked it--reflects once more the underlying symbol of the lilac with its "dull bloom." She does not dwell entirely in the past; she goes about her daily duties and invites others to share the serenity of her household. If she did not find it possible to countenance marriage, she does not waste her life in useless recriminations; realizing that she has missed one important part of life, she reacts by making the most of what remains. Her ability to assess her position objectively reveals a maturity that Westbrook

is apparently not willing to grant her. She is not a mournful and sentimental recluse but a woman who has created her own kind of happiness. She is heroic in refusing to assume the conventional pose of the lonely and love-lorn spinster; she has made something positive out of her existence.

One might argue that her initial attitude toward marriage is itself neurotic. Mrs. Freeman does much to counteract the view that her heroine was simply indulging in a "nervous whim" by presenting Caroline as a kind of secular nun. She is habited always in lilac, the color she wore when she first met her lover. Since this lilac motif is associated with the dim and old-fashioned yet attractive background of the heroine's life, it could be argued that she had already (unconsciously) made her choice of the single life even before she encountered this young man. The dream could then have reinforced her decision; she was momentarily tempted by this exposure to sexual desire, worldliness, or wickedness--several interpretations are possible--but she remained true to the lily and the dove, symbols of purity. She renounced the "impure" aspects of the world, holding to the sincere hope that such a life was "what God meant" for her. Her belief that this renunciation had divine approval (p. 47) reinforces the image of her as a nunlike personality. At the end of the story, a neighbor reports that Miss Caroline has died, adding, "I do believe that Caroline Munson, if she is an angel . . .

doesn't look much more different from what she did before than those lilacs over there do from last year's ones" (p. 48). These final words underline the saintliness of Miss Munson's life on earth. By associating the lilac motif with her heroine's transformation into an angel, Mrs. Freeman reveals a possible awareness of this flower as a symbol of resurrection. In this context, Miss Caroline's fondness for lilac could reflect her nunlike anticipation of heaven, although this religious note is not stressed. Throughout the story Mrs. Freeman has kept her heroine in a secular rather than a pious setting. What the author seems to be saying through her nun image is that certain women, because of their psychological nature, are better off single than married. She implies that they are not to be condemned for their attitude, but that they should be respected as individuals who are still capable of enjoying their own kind of happiness.

"A New England Nun," the title story of Mary Wilkins Freeman's second collection of adult fiction, is another tale that makes use of the "nun" motif as a means of defending the decision of the heroine not to marry. Louisa Ellis, whose lover Joe has come back after fourteen years at sea, finds herself reluctant to marry him. She has therefore been labelled by critics as a neurotic and repressed old maid. Jay Martin[8] and David Hirsch[9] both point out the symbolism of the chained dog in Louisa's back yard--an animal which, they say, represents the

heroine's suppressed sexual passion. Joe's return is supposed to present a threat to release this passion. In the context of the story, the sympathetic Joe argues that the dog should be allowed his freedom, whereas Louisa is afraid that he will attack someone as he did once before. (Here the analogy that Martin and Hirsch suggests breaks down, as there is no evidence that Louisa ever went on a sexual rampage.) Like Caroline Munson, Louisa may be averse to the marriage relationship; but this does not necessarily mean that she is to be condemned as abnormal.

Mrs. Freeman demonstrates that Louisa is in some ways neurotic--not because she is afraid of sex, but because she indulges in certain compulsive rituals of behavior. These rituals limit her freedom as an individual. She wears three aprons when doing her housework, each garment being assigned to one specific task. She arranges the books and ornaments in her parlor in a precise order and is actually uncomfortable if these arrangements are disturbed. It is easy to label her as the fussy old maid of the stereotype. The author's method of presentation helps, however, to modify this impression. Mrs. Freeman carefully shows the favorable side of Louisa's life by using images of beauty and serenity, much as she did with Miss Caroline in "A Symphony in Lavender." Louisa takes conscious enjoyment in the dainty meals she prepares, served on her best china; in her immaculately kept house, with its window-panes

shining "like jewels"; and in her "orderly bureau-drawers, with their exquisitely folded contents redolent with lavender and sweet clover and very purity" (pp. 9-10). She has "almost the enthusiasm of an artist over the mere order and cleanliness of her solitary home," and the details are accordingly expressed as though each domestic achievement were indeed an artistic accomplishment. Even the compulsive rituals she performs are softened by terms that emphasize a love of perfect order rather than a dreary imprisonment in rigid routine. For instance, her three aprons are all dainty and attractive: green gingham, pink and white print, white lace. It is almost as though Louisa dramatizes her domestic roles by changing her costume.

Society in this story is presented as a destructive element threatening the delicate world that Louisa has created for herself. She has been raised to think of marriage as "a reasonable feature and a probable desirability of life. She had listened with calm docility to her mother's views on the subject" (p. 7). The passivity of which Westbrook accuses her[10] is present in the early part of her life, but exists through her willingness to accept society's expectations without question rather than through her later reluctance to marry. A conflict arises between her newly realized aversion to marriage and her firmly instilled conviction that an engagement is sacred. "Joe Dagget had been fond of her and working for her all these years. It was not for her, whatever came to pass, to prove

untrue and break his heart" (p. 12). Of course, society has also taught her that a betrothal is almost as binding as the marriage vows themselves. Ironically, Joe feels much the same way, although he finds that he has fallen in love with another girl: "I ain't going back on a woman that's waited for me fourteen years, an' break her heart" (p. 14). Unquestioning obedience to the mores of a society that upholds the sacredness of a betrothal is shown, through this situation, to be very foolish. Both Joe and Louisa would have been miserable if they had married each other. When she finds out about the other girl, Louisa is brave enough to risk public disapproval by breaking the engagement.

Society is also represented unfavorably in the person of Joe's old mother, who would dismiss all of Louisa's pretty rituals as silly. Married to Joe, Louisa would have to take care of this "domineering, shrewd old matron" who always had everything her own way--a threat to Louisa's individuality. She would have more taxing domestic duties imposed upon her, since "it would be contrary to all thrifty village traditions for her to keep more than one servant" (p. 9). And both Joe and his mother would "laugh and frown down all these pretty but senseless old maiden ways." In presenting the utilitarian, insensitive view that others would take of Louisa's achievements, the author implies that her heroine's life may have spiritual values that practical minds cannot

understand. Society would tear her from her hortus conclusus and turn her into an unpaid household drudge. Marriage, as Mrs. Freeman suggests it here, is no romantic idyl.

Most important of all, Joe's very personality is a threat to Louisa's peace. Mrs. Freeman is more convincing in this story in her presentation of the unwanted suitor. To hint that a woman might be better off single than married to an ineffectual David Emmons (as in "Two Old Lovers") or even a dashing Wicked Artist (as in "A Symphony in Lavender") is to slant the situation rather unfairly. Joe is made an admirable character with many attractive qualities. He and Louisa are, however, not compatible. He cannot even pay a call without tracking in dirt, disarranging her books, and knocking over her sewing-basket. This awkwardness may stem from nervousness in her presence, but it has also more subtle implications. Joe sees his sweetheart "as if surrounded by a hedge of lace" and he is "afraid to stir lest he should put a clumsy foot or hand through the fairy web" (p. 6). It is surprising that the Nun's Freudian critics have not seized upon this imagery, the sexual connotations of which the author was perhaps unaware. Here is a delicately presented metaphor expressing what will happen to the kind of life Louisa cherishes if she allows Joe to enter it. The motif of destruction is further reinforced by her anticipations of married life: "She had visions, so startling that she half

repudiated them as indelicate, of coarse masculine belongings strewn around in endless litter; of dust and disorder arising necessarily from a coarse masculine presence in the midst of all this delicate harmony" (p. 10). Louisa would find marriage repellent because it would represent an invasion not only of her house but also of her body and her personality. And Mrs. Freeman suggests no compensations for the shattering of the fine hedge of lace. Louisa is not capable of the passion succinctly expressed by Lily, with whom Joe has fallen in love: "I ain't the sort of a girl to feel this way twice" (p. 15). Louisa might well have reacted to any suitor as she does to Joe. She seems, like Caroline Munson, to be psychologically unsuited to married life.

The nun image is more explicit in this story than in "A Symphony in Lavender," since it appears not only in the title but also throughout in the consistent presentation of Louisa's placid and passionless nature and her devotion to the worship of order. The story ends with a specific comparison between the heroine and a nun: "She gazed ahead through a long reach of future days strung together like pearls in a rosary, every one like the others, and all smooth and flawless and innocent, and her heart went up in thankfulness" (p. 17). Louisa Ellis need not be pitied for her loveless life; she has chosen a way not suited to everyone but satisfying to her. I think that Marie-Thérèse Blanc-Bentzon, one of Mrs. Freeman's contem-

porary critics, is close to the spirit of the story when she says that Louisa is one of "des anges un peu froids qui dissimulent leurs ailes, des religieuses par instinct dont la vraie place serait au couvent."[11]

In one sense, Louisa's life is limited by her renunciation of marriage. A strong contrast is inserted in the character of Lily, whose capacity for passionate love has already been mentioned. She is "a girl tall and full-figured . . . her strong yellow hair braided in a close knot . . . . full of a calm rustic strength and bloom, with a masterful way which might have beseemed a princess" (p. 13). Lily, a rural earth-goddess, represents the vigor and vitality of the sort of personality foreign to the nunlike Louisa. And Louisa weeps a little, near the end of the story, for the lack of something she was born without. Yet the overall presentation of Louisa is not pessimistic. The story concludes on a note of peaceful relief; the heroine's quiet joy in the anticipation of a serene, undisturbed future suggests that her life has the same "dull bloom" as that of Caroline Munson. Her realization that she is better off unmarried and her courageous contravention of the rule about sacred engagements show that she is assertive enough to save the small, dainty universe she has created. If it were destroyed, she would have nothing in its place save an unfortunate marriage. As in "A Symphony in Lavender," Mrs. Freeman demonstrates that certain women possess personalities better suited to

spinsterhood than to matrimony--and that such individuals should not be criticized for failing to conform to the social ideal. A woman who is a "religieuse par instinct" should be permitted to withdraw into the sanctuary she has chosen.

The difference between the restricted yet serene lives of Caroline Munson and Louisa Ellis and an existence of dreary and imprisoning ritual is made even clearer if we consider another story, "A Patient Waiter" (A Humble Romance). Fidelia Almy has spent the last forty years awaiting the return of her lover. She travels every day to the post office for a letter that never arrives; she even makes a trip on Sundays, when the office is shut. She decks her parlor daily with flowers but keeps the furniture draped in white sheets to protect it from dust and sunshine. Unlike Caroline Munson, she refuses to allow either fresh air--or visitors--into this sacred chamber. Her outspoken sister is all too correct in saying that the parlor furniture looks as though it had been "laid out" like a corpse, for Fidelia has created an altar to the dead past. She has not allowed her surroundings and herself to mellow, as has Miss Caroline; neither is she capable, like Louisa, of enjoying the results of her orderliness and using her best things for her own pleasure. Her daily habits have ceased to have significance; they are merely exercises in futility.

The image Mrs. Freeman uses to present Fidelia

suggests no nunlike peace or beauty, but rather the pathetic sadness of a faded blossom: "Fidelia stood there . . . with her head nodding like a flower in the wind. It nodded so all the time. She had a disease of the nerves.' Her yellow-gray hair was . . . put up carefully in a little coil, with two long curls on either side" (p. 400). That she is attempting to retain the semblance of youth and beauty through this girlish hairstyle makes her even more poignant; she has wasted herself in waiting and in striving to maintain the appearance of what has long since departed. She has nodded in acquiescence to the tradition that a woman can have no happiness without a husband, and has sacrificed herself to this convention. She presents a vivid contrast to Louisa Ellis, who transformed her waiting period into a positive enjoyment of the present. Fidelia has clung to the socially acceptable role of awaiting her betrothed even after the circumstances make such a position ridiculous.

Mrs. Freeman does not imply that Caroline Munson and Louisa Ellis should be condemned or unduly pitied for having given up the chance to marry. She does show that their lives, by conventional standards, are narrow; but she strongly suggests that both heroines possess temperaments more suited to spinsterhood. Like nuns, they have made a deliberate choice in favor of an existence based on peaceful surroundings and devotion to ritual. They have likewise rejected certain worldly pleasures. There is the

danger that these rituals will result in compulsive and limiting behavior. Such compulsiveness affects Louisa Ellis, although it does not seriously interfere with her conscious pleasure in her little world. Neither she nor Caroline Munson resembles the pathetic Fidelia, who has permitted her rituals to imprison her in a rigid and meaningless pattern of living. Caroline and Louisa are both New England nuns who have achieved small but satisfying retreats from the disorder of the world, set apart from their troublesome lovers who are a threat to passionless order and peace. It does not really matter whether these suitors represent sexual invasion, evil, or clumsiness; they are simply a discordant note in these otherwise harmonious lives. Mrs. Freeman's compassionate depiction of these "deviant" heroines stands out vividly against a social background that idealizes matrimony. Her presentation suggests that she possessed insight into aspects of female sexual psychology that at that time would scarcely have been admitted to exist--and that even today are given the pejorative label of "frigidity."

Maria of "Two Old Lovers" serves as counterpoint to these two nunlike heroines; she has to face a single life she did not choose. Like Louisa and Caroline, she succeeds in extracting some meaning from her life instead of behaving like a forlorn spinster. The difference here is that while the other two women spend their days in enriching their own private hearths, Maria takes time to

make her lover's home more comfortable. If Louisa and Caroline are like nuns who exist most happily through their dedication to order and peace, Maria is a mother-figure who gains her satisfaction in caring for those whom she loves. There is no indication that Maria is more to be commended for her attitude; after all, she is doing what she enjoys. Each of these protagonists, in her own way, is reacting positively to the threat of lonely spinsterhood by arranging her life according to her own psychological makeup. Mrs. Freeman's contented spinsters, like her paupers, are happiest in the creation and enjoyment of their own personal sanctuary. Through the depiction of such characters, Mary Wilkins Freeman is presenting her own feminist statement: that women may lead fulfilled lives even though they do not conform to the social convention that idealizes marriage as the highest goal of womanhood.

NOTES

Epigraph: Woman's Wrongs (Boston, 1868). Cited in C. J. Furness, ed., The Genteel Female: An Anthology (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931), p. 252.

1 Samuel Cutler, comp., The Bridal Souvenir (New York: American Tract Society, 1892), pp. 9-10.

2 Brown, p. 107.

3 "Petition," line 6.

4 Mary Wilkins Freeman, pp. 58 ff.

5 Foster, p. 107.

6 Mary Wilkins Freeman, p. 30.

7 Ibid., p. 38.

8 Martin, p. 150.

9 "Subdued Meaning in 'A New England Nun'," Studies in Short Fiction, 2 (1964-65), 124-136.

10 Mary Wilkins Freeman, pp. 58 ff.

11 "Un Romancier de la Nouvelle-Angleterre," Revue des Deux Mondes, 136 (1896), 556.

CHAPTER III

> Let me admonish you, first of all, to go alone; to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil.
>
> --Ralph Waldo Emerson

> Now if you do condemn me for speaking what in my conscience I know to be truth I must commit myself unto the Lord.
>
> --Anne Hutchinson

By the nineteenth century, America had moved away from the strict theocracy of its colonial period. In New England, the Calvinist establishment was making way for the more liberal Unitarian doctrines, which were in turn to be rejected by such figures as Emerson in favor of a belief in the ability of man to commune directly with God "without mediator or veil." More spectacular religious movements were also taking place. The Oneida Colony, based upon communal living that did away with the traditional structure of family relationships, was established in New York State. A group known as the Millerites predicted that the end of the world would occur in 1843. Evangelists appeared, exhorting the people to

cleanse themselves of their sins; names such as Dwight L. Moody and Ira D. Sankey became well known in England as well as in America. The measured rhetoric of Emerson's "Divinity School Address" and the revivalist exhortation to be "washed in the blood of the Lamb" may seem to have little in common, yet both reflect the religious self-examination and re-evaluation that was typical of this era.

As a corollary to this quest for religious truth, a great bulk of sentimentally pious writing appeared. Books were published that were little more than glorified tracts, dealing with "good" people who exhibited saintly behavior and "bad" people who indulged in worldliness or wickedness (qualities often considered synonymous at this time). The protagonists of these efforts were often impossibly angelic children who converted their elders through their godly example and who often died young, like Mrs. Stowe's Little Eva. Daisy of Susan B. Warner's Melbourne House (1864) endures family persecution by saying grace at the table of her agnostic parents and being subsequently punished; the famous heroine of Martha Finley's "Elsie" books (1868-1905) is disciplined for refusing to play the piano for her father's guests on Sunday. Such righteous characters would be given rewards (earthly or heavenly), while the ungodly were overcome by suitable retribution. Among the major sins deplored by these books were Sabbath-breaking, swearing, using tobacco or alcohol,

disobeying those in authority, and reading novels other than those devoted to Christian morality. On the positive side, worship of God consisted of attending church, keeping Sunday, reading the Bible, attempting to convert the sinful, and trusting implicitly in providence. To question the ways of God was tantamount to blasphemy. This adherence to the outward forms of piety--an attitude that Emerson deplored--was to assert itself as the theme of much popular literature. The hypocrisy that lurked behind this godly façade is revealed by Mark Twain in Huckleberry Finn: the King, in the camp-meeting episode, testifies that he is a reformed and repentant pirate and collects eighty-seven dollars and seventy-five cents from the gullible congregation. But satires upon religion were less popular than pious effusions dedicated to "stepping heavenward."

The early fiction of Mary Wilkins Freeman reflects a reaction against the easy religious attitudes that judged behavior as Good or Bad according to whether or not certain set observances were carried out. Her protagonists, not unlike Emerson, are more concerned with finding out the truth about God for themselves than with maintaining the outward appearance of a "true Christian." They are the literary descendants of Anne Hutchinson and the Quakers, who suffered persecution and banishment at the hands of the Puritan theocracy because they affirmed their belief in the individual revelation of the will of

God--the "inner light," as the Quakers called it. Mrs. Freeman's near-agnostic characters are in fact desperately searching for a God in whom they can believe, for in the accepted pious rituals and customs of their society they can find no comfort. If the church was once a dynamic power, it is demonstrated in her stories to have lost its vitality. Her tales of religious rebellion could be used to illustrate Emerson's "Faith makes us, and not we it, and faith makes its own forms."[1] Part of the heroism evinced by Mrs. Freeman's religious nonconformists is reflected in their ability to transcend the dead rituals of conventional piety and, despite the threat of social ostracism, to continue their personal search for God.

In addition to the disapproval of their fellows, such individuals must also face another adverse pressure: conscience. Mrs. Freeman's writing shows that she distinguishes between social conscience, the specific social-moral code brought to bear upon the developing personality, and private conscience, the "inner light" that represents one's independently acquired moral standards. Certain of her characters rebel against the religious codes of their society--in effect, against the "New England conscience" that has been instilled in them. For some of these figures, private conscience is strong enough to nullify the pressures of certain earlier teachings about right and wrong. They can say, "I know I am doing the right thing," no matter how much their behavior conflicts with accepted

standards. Others cannot withstand their guilty feelings; they may temporarily convince themselves that what they are doing is more "right" than what they have been taught, but they ultimately fall victim to the implacable New England conscience, which demands public confession and penance as the means of purging the soul.

The moral context of Mrs. Freeman's stories of religious conflict differs sharply from that of the popular pious literature of her time. She does not mete out rewards and punishments according to the "Christian" behavior of her characters. Rather she demonstrates that people who show all the outward signs of religion may in fact be hypocrites who adhere to the forms but who are inwardly far from God. In contrast, she presents protagonists who may violate set codes and who are nevertheless justified since they are, in effect, searching for some evidence of a just and compassionate God. Retribution, in the form of guilt, may fall upon her weaker characters, who are unable to maintain an independent private conscience; such guilt is not shown as evidence of Divine punishment but the unfortunate psychological effect of the New England conscience.

Austin Warren recognizes the distinction that Mrs. Freeman makes between social and private moral codes; he points out that "in the 'cases of conscience' Miss Wilkins gives us, it is often a struggle between the authority of the Old Testament (as her people understand it)

and something they don't think of as 'religious' at all--the voice of common sense, the voice of private conscience, the voice of 'charity'--that is, of love."[2] That the rebellion of Freeman characters is based on this moral conflict is a point overlooked by most critics. They see such rebelliousness only as the inevitable outcome of a long period of repression. Parrington asserts, "The New England conventions were always building higher the dams of their emotions until they broke and the roily waters rushed out in a wasting flood."[3] Brooks adds that "the more it is repressed, the more intense the will to live becomes . . . and . . . if, at last, it finds an outlet, it expresses itself in proportion to its former repression."[4] Possibly the author's own comment about one of her rebellious heroines is partly responsible for such observations. She wrote that "this outbreak . . . was tropical, and more than tropical, for a New England nature has a floodgate, and the power which it releases is an accumulation" (A New England Nun, p. 28). The problem with such a critical approach is that it does not go far enough. The recognition of dammed emotions bursting forth should be followed by an examination of the nature of the rebellion. To suggest that Mrs. Freeman's characters are frustrated neurotics whose occasional outbursts are the result of repression, and to leave it at that, is to see only part of the situation. As the author shows, her rebels are not just going on an emotional rampage

for the sake of relieving pent-up pressures. Their attitudes do not so much reflect bad temper or spite as a strong sense of moral injustice. They must face this conflict alone, unaided by the established religious community that is so concerned with the outward appearance of piety, yet that is lacking in true charity, or love.

For example, "An Independent Thinker" (A Humble Romance) presents Esther Gay, who refuses to attend meeting because she is too deaf to hear the sermon. Instead, she stays at home on Sundays and knits stockings, thereby incurring social disapproval because she is both failing to worship God in the approved manner and breaking the Sabbath. She defends her position vigorously: "I s'pose you think it would be better for an old woman that's stone deaf, an' can't hear a word of the preachin', to go to meetin' an' set there, doin' nothin' two hours, instead of stayin' to home an' knittin', to airn a leetle money to give to the Lord. All I've got to say is, you kin think so, then. I'm a-goin' to do what's right, no matter what happens" (p. 305). Mrs. Freeman makes it clear that Esther's stand is based not on any desire to break either the First or the Fourth Commandment, but rather on her own reinterpretation of these edicts, according to common sense. But her neighbors are so concerned with the appearance of piety that they cannot understand that Esther is worshipping God just as much, if not more so, than they are. Mrs. Freeman illustrates the extent of this rigid and

imprisoning adherence to formal codes through the character of Lavinia Dodge, Esther's neighbor. Lavinia, a timid spinster, is totally subject to the all-seeing eye of her bedridden but authoritarian mother, who represents the society that condemns all nonconforming behavior. The latter keeps up a single refrain: "I ain't goin' to hev you goin' over to Esther Gay's, Sabbath day. . . . She ain't no kind of a girl. . . . Stayin' home from meetin' and knittin'. I ain't goin' to hev you over thar, Laviny" (p. 299). The poor daughter is so bound by her mother's influence that even after the old lady dies and Lavinia is threatened with being taken to the poorhouse, she cannot accept Esther's invitation to share her home. Lavinia is physically crippled with rheumatism, and the author shows that this woman's mind has become just as rigid and helpless as her body. She provides a pathetic contrast to Esther, who has made her conscience compatible with reason and common sense.

Esther refuses to back down even when the ostracism she has brought upon herself endangers the love affair of her granddaughter. Emotional pressure is added to social disapproval, but she will not give in. "She knitted more zealously than ever Sundays; indeed, there was, to her possibly distorted perceptions, a religious zeal in it" (p. 305). That Esther's position is too extreme might be the reader's reaction, except that Mrs. Freeman reveals a more serious distortion on the part of the suitor's

mother. "She said any girl whose folks didn't keep Sunday, an' stayed away from meetin' an' worked, wouldn't amount to much. . . . Henry said his mother took on so he was afraid she'd die, if he didn't give it up" (p. 304). It is this narrow-mindedness, coupled with emotional blackmail, that is really opposing the union of Henry and Hatty. Esther's reaction is to summon all her forces against this opposition: "She seemed to bristle out suddenly with points, from her knitting-needles to her sharp elbows and thin chin and nose" (p. 304). She is presented as more or less justified in her determination to worship God and keep Sunday after her own fashion; it is the community that is narrow and restricted in its outlook. Hatty and Henry are victims not of Esther's obstinacy but of a society that is not willing to relax its preoccupation with the outward forms of piety in order to make way for vital, if unconventional, modes of worship.

Because of the apparent triviality of the situation--social ostracism because of Sunday knitting--this story may seem essentially a sketch illustrating "typical" New England obstinacy. But the underlying motif is serious enough. Esther's determination points toward a larger area of conflict; she is opposing a society that rigidly adheres to formalism, and choosing to worship God according to the dictates of her own private conscience.

Another rebel against established religious custom is Jane Muzzy of "A Tardy Thanksgiving" (A Humble Romance),

who refuses to keep what was, at that time, a religious holiday nearly as important as Sunday. Jane feels that she has nothing for which to be thankful:

> "I s'pose ef I could go to meetin' Thanksgivin' mornin', an' hear the sermon, an' then set down to turkey and plum-puddin', an' be a-thankin' the Lord in my heart for lettin' my husband fall off the scaffold in the barn an' git killed last summer, an' for lettin' my daughter Charlotte die of a quick consumption last spring, an' my son John two year ago this fall, I might keep Thanksgivin' as well as other folks. But I can't, an' I ain't a-goin' to purtend I do. Thar's one thing about it--I ain't a hypocrite, an' never was."
>
> (p. 50)

Mrs. Muzzy's forthright stand is brought out in contrast to the somewhat weak-minded neighbor to whom all this is confided; the latter, such a nonentity that she is not even given a name at first, is made the representative of a society that is placidly willing to follow custom and that is shocked at any deviation from it or any trace of individual thinking. Mrs. Muzzy, who may appear irreligious to such people, is in fact such a strong believer that she refuses to worship God unless she can do so sincerely.

It may be difficult for a reader to consider this story seriously, once Jane Muzzy affirms her defiance by saying, "I'm a-goin' to stay hum, an'--do my pig-work" (p. 50). For the rebellion to culminate in such an anticlimax makes the entire situation seem humorous and trivial, perhaps because of the localisms used. But as the story

progresses, darker motifs appear. Jane's niece Lizzie, disappointed by a fickle suitor, is the only one willing to assist the rebel: "I don't care about eating turkey and plum-pudding either--I'll come over and help you" (p. 54). The ensuing scene, with the two women cutting pork in an atmosphere of heat and kettles of boiling lard, is not unlike that of a witches' kitchen, with the old woman and her passive apprentice stirring up an unholy brew of defiance against God. The author remains objective; she shows Mrs. Muzzy watching her niece with "furtive uneasiness" at having coerced the girl into sharing her rebellion, but there is no hint that Mrs. Freeman blames Jane for her refusal to be a hypocrite. The moral problem involved is in the mind of the heroine who is, in effect, daring God to react to her rebellion.

Mrs. Muzzy eventually spills a kettle of hot fat on her foot. The author attributes the mishap to accident, nothing more. Struck down in this fashion, however, the heroine is convinced that the Lord has intervened. When Lizzie's mother arrives with a plate of Thanksgiving dinner, Mrs. Muzzy eats it before she will have anything done to soothe her injury. This act is a kind of penance, but implicit in it is also a measure of triumph. She explains, "I want to eat some turkey an' plum-puddin' afore I'm an hour older, an' keep Thanksgivin'. I said I wouldn't, but the Lord got ahead of me, an' I'm glad he has" (p. 59). Joy, not repentance, is her chief emotion. She has achieved

a kind of victory in having, in her own estimation, forced the Lord to pay some personal attention to her. He does care about her, after all. Rising above bodily pain, she can eat her Thanksgiving dinner as a sacred meal celebrating her reunion with God.

The domestic or otherwise apparently trivial contexts in which Mrs. Freeman places these examples of religious nonconformity may lead the reader to expect a humorous tale. Mrs. Muzzy's decision to stay at home and do her pig-work is no more a gross infraction of Divine law than is Esther Gay's Sunday knitting. But just as Esther's stubborn production of knitted stockings is given overtones of "religious zeal," so Jane Muzzy's pig-work stands for a grim rebellion against a God who demands lip service. Mary Wilkins Freeman is again using the simple, everyday material of life in order to present the conflict between her protagonists and their environment.

Another defiant soul is Ann Millet of "An Object of Love" (A Humble Romance). For years she has been faithful to the conventional rituals of worship, accepting without question the "stereotyped prayers" of the "dull, middle-aged preacher" (p. 271). Her conformity is underlined by the description of her meeting garb--"a poor, tidy black bonnet and an obsolete black coat, with no seam in the whole of the voluminous back. That had been the style when Miss Millet had laid aside dressmaking, and she had never gone a step further in fashions. She had . . .

treated her old patterns as conservatively as she did her Bible" (p. 271). But Ann is to break suddenly out of this pattern of piety. When her cat Willy, the only companion of her lonely life, disappears, she refuses to attend meeting any longer. Like Jane Muzzy, she feels that she now has nothing for which to be thankful. All her life she has lived by one characteristic phrase, "I'd orter be thankful," obeying the dictates of pious society and yet imposing on them a touch of individuality and independence. There is a fine distinction between I am thankful and I ought to be thankful. With Willy gone, she does not even feel this obligation. God has let her down, and she is resentful. "I ain't--never felt as ef I'd orter begrutch other--women their homes an' their folks. I thought--p'rhaps--I could git along better without 'em than--some; an' the Lord knowed it, an' seein' thar wa'n't enough to go round he gave 'em to them that needed 'em most. I ain't--never--felt--as ef I'd orter complain. But--thar--was--cats--enough. I might'a hed--that--much" (p. 274). The element of potential comedy in this is lessened by the way in which the author has portrayed the reaction of society to Ann's rebellion. The aptly named Mrs. Stone, a neighbor who comments to Ann that it must be lonely for her but who does nothing to alleviate the situation, replies to this outburst with empty platitudes: "I don't understand any human bein' with an immortal soul a-settin' so much by a cat. . . . I thought the Lord would be a comfort to you" (p. 274). Ann takes refuge in deafness:

"I can't hear what you say." What Mrs. Stone has to say is meaningless; it has never occurred to her that the Lord might need human assistance in manifesting comfort--and love--toward his people. And the minister is equally useless. "It was a case entirely outside his experience, and he did not know how to deal with it. . . . It seemed to him bordering on sacrilege to treat this trouble of Ann Millet's like a genuine affliction" (p. 277). The failure of established religion to recognize that a serious breach between a soul and God may occur even in trivial circumstances is something that Mrs. Freeman demonstrates more than once. She shows, here and elsewhere, that appointed ministers of the gospel seem curiously helpless in dealing with such crises. Ann's minister is apparently unable to recognize any apostasy as serious unless it approaches near-Faustian proportions.

Willy is, of course, much more than just a pet; he is a visible sign of God's love for the lonely Ann. As she says, "I'm here, and I ain't thar; an' I've got hands, an' I need somethin' I kin touch" (p. 274). The scene in which she stands outdoors under the stars, calling Willy over and over, illustrates her pathetic position. God's presence may dwell in the remote heavens, but all this grandeur means nothing to her; it is cold and indifferent in contrast to the presence of her beloved cat--something she can touch.

The cat is eventually found locked in the cellar.

I can find no evidence that Ann shut him up through a subconscious resentment of his presence, as Westbrook suggests.[5] She is repentant: "I've been an awful wicked woman. I ain't been to meetin', an' I've talked. . . . I'd orter offer up Willy. Lor' sakes! think of me a-sayin' what I did, an' him down cellar!" (p. 278). But she is not conventionally repentant, and she does not resume the old pattern. She no longer goes up to speak to the minister after meeting, but waits for him to approach her, and in reply to his tactful platitudes about being glad she is "feeling better" she says only, "The cat has come back." She has returned only because she now has something about which to be grateful to God; no longer a passive follower of the conventional worship ritual, she will attend meeting on her own terms. This story contains a sharp condemnation of a society that mouths Scriptural phrases but that is unwilling to grant Ann any tangible comfort, although it is quick enough to blame her for her nonconformity. For evidence of God's care, Ann must turn not to the church or her pious neighbors, but to her cat.

Like Ann, Sarah Reed of "The Bar Light-House" (A Humble Romance) expresses a desire for the tangible presence of God: "You kin talk about seein' with the spirit, an' worshippin' with the spirit; anybody needs a little somethin' to catch hold on with the flesh; when it's all spirit it's too much for a mortal bein' to comprehend. . . . I ain't never had a prayer answered in my life. . . .

Ef you call it answerin' prayer to give one thing when you ask for another, I don't. An' I'd ruther not believe thar was any God than to believe he'd do a thing like that" (p. 183). Sarah refuses to believe in the God that orthodoxy decrees she should worship; such a being, in her eyes, is no more than a celestial promise-breaker, an entity unconcerned with human needs. She is unimpressed by the minister who tries to convert her with "tonguey confidence and ingenuousness"; like the clergyman in "An Object of Love," he is too dependent upon formal expressions of piety to deal with a soul in real spiritual distress. It is necessary for Sarah, like Jane Muzzy, to come to terms personally with her God.

It is unfortunate that Mrs. Freeman lapses into dramatic coincidence in order to bring about the conversion of her heroine. Left alone in a storm with the lighthouse tower unlit, and fearing for the safety of her nephew out on the sea, Sarah--a cripple confined to her chair--drags herself up the lighthouse stairs, only to find that someone has lit the lamp. This is enough to convince her that God exists; this, to her, is a tangible sign of his presence. There are two problems about this resolution. First, the author informs us that a neighbor came in, without Sarah's knowledge, and lit the lamp. This seems implausible, for surely any visitor to the lonely lighthouse would have stopped to reassure the crippled woman that the lamp was functioning, especially since there was a storm approaching.

In addition, the whole business of the lamp is gratuitous in that Sarah has already been granted a straightforward sign. She has been given the strength to get out of her chair and climb the stairs, despite the previous immobility of her limbs. "In the midst of her agony a great calm fell suddenly over her. 'I will go an' light the lamp myself,' she said, in an awed voice, 'an' He will go with me.' Slowly Sarah Reed arose on feet that had not borne her weight for five years. Every movement was excruciating torture, but she paid no heed to it; she seemed to feel it and yet be outside of it" (p. 190). Here is the true moment of Sarah Reed's conversion; she has pleaded with God, and she has been given an answer. But the impact of this simple yet moving passage is to a great extent nullified by the contrived ending. There was no need for the author to trick Sarah into believing in God, for she had already realized his presence. The additional plot twist makes Sarah's agonized efforts futile.

Luella Norcross of "Life-Everlastin'" (A New England Nun) is also presented as an apostate. She rejects her childhood religion, seeing the story of Christ as not being reasonable. At the same time, she practises a Christ-like attitude toward humanity, giving aid to tramps, pedlars and other unfortunates. She is thereby the despair of more respectable society. Her sister thinks that if "Luella would jest have a pretty new bonnet, an' go to meetin' Sabbath-days like other folks" she would be

perfectly acceptable (p. 340). The sister, Mrs. Ansel, is an initially comic sketch; she is more concerned about the set of her new bonnet than about her sister's spiritual condition, as this conversation with the village milliner reveals:

> "I don't know when Luella's had a new bonnet, Mis' Slate. Of course she don't need any, not goin' to meetin' or anything . . . I feel bad 'nough 'bout it. . . ."
> "It must be a dreadful trial to you, Mis' Ansel."
> "You don't know anything about it, Mis' Slate. You think there's bows enough on it, don't you?"
> "Oh, plenty. I was speakin' to Jennie the other day about your sister--"
> "An' the strings ain't too long?"
>
> (p. 340)

This amusing dialogue reflects the vast difference between the outward garments of piety (the new bonnet) and the inner, spiritual raiment that Mrs. Ansel sadly lacks. She typifies a society concerned more with outward appearance than with inward religious commitment--a society hostile toward the individual who refuses to conform. Such a conflict is expressed in the scene in which Mrs. Ansel berates her sister for failing to comment upon the new bonnet, while Luella stands patiently listening with her basket of everlasting-flowers. Her distribution of herb-pillows made from these flowers, gifts of a "soft, healing fragrance," is a tangible expression of her character. She is almost Christlike in her bringing of "life-everlasting" to others--except that she is concerned with practical, earthly comforts rather than heavenly bliss. Her kindness

to social outcasts is in striking contrast to the attitude of Mrs. Ansel, who sees only that her sister does not go to meeting and that she associates with "low" people. Like Emerson, Luella might well have replied, "What have I to do with the sacredness of tradition, if I live wholly from within?"[6]

Again Mrs. Freeman's stereotyped clergyman appears, with his inevitable supply of platitudes: "Your soul's salvation--do you never think of that? . . . You know heaven and your soul's salvation depend upon it" (p. 351). Luella retorts, "I ain't never worried much about my soul's salvation . . . I've had too many other souls to think about. An' it seems to me I'd be dreadful piggish to make goin' to heaven any reason for believin' a thing that ain't reasonable" (p. 351). Here Mrs. Freeman presents a point of view very different from traditional piety; she reveals the under-side of religious conviction as a selfish attitude that puts not only personal adornment, but also personal salvation, ahead of any concern for the welfare of others. It is this false version of religion--lip service and hypocrisy--that Luella cannot countenance; she insists that there must be a place for reason in the worship of God. Like Ann Millet and Sarah Reed, she needs a tangible sign.

Luella is eventually converted. John Gleason, who has robbed and murdered an old couple in the village, shelters in a vacant house next door to Luella. She is

faced with a terrible dilemma. She must either shield him and provide him with food (her automatic reaction to the needs of any suffering human being), or she must betray him to a society in which she, too, is a kind of outcast. "Have I got to give him up to be hung? What's goin' to become of him then? Where'll he go to when he's been so awful wicked? . . . Here he is a-takin' my vittles, an' comin' to my house, an' a-trustin' me!" (p. 357). She realizes that he should not be permitted to go free and possibly kill again, but she is in such mental anguish that she leaves her own door open and her valuables spread out on the table, giving him the opportunity to repeat his crime so that she will not have to make any decision. But he does not come near her. Shaken by her all-night vigil, Luella goes in the morning to the sheriff. The next Sunday she appears at church, announcing that she has decided to believe in Jesus Christ because she cannot "see any other way out of it for John Gleason" (p. 362).

Presumably Mrs. Freeman intended to show that Luella's conversion was motivated by reason, and that she finally decided that the existence of Christ as a redeemer was the only possible answer to the moral dilemma of how to deal with John Gleason both justly and mercifully. But there is too much of a gap in Luella's thinking; with all the previous emphasis on this heroine's rational mind, there is no logical link between despair and decision. Even this authorial dodging of the theological climax does

not wholly mar the conclusion of the story. Luella remains Luella right to the end, appearing at church in her shabby old bonnet and announcing her decision to become a Christian not from any personal desire for her own salvation but from her anxiety about the soul of another. There is a fine irony here; whereas the community attempted to convert Luella into conforming to the accepted modes of worship, she was in fact brought to Christ through a man who was a thief and a murderer.

Failing to attend meeting is not the only outward sign of rebellion against God in Mrs. Freeman's fiction. Sarah Penn in "The Revolt of Mother" (A New England Nun) opposes the established code not by refusing to go to church but by flouting the wishes of the man God has supposedly ordained as her lord and master. For forty years Sarah has assumed the role of subordinate wife, but the author points out that this has been a voluntary act: "Her forehead was mild and benevolent . . . there were meek downward lines about her nose and mouth; but her eyes, fixed upon the old man, looked as if the meekness had been the result of her own will, never the will of another" (p. 449). When she finally rebels against Adoniram, she is firmly convinced that it is right for her to do so; like Esther Gay, she possesses a strong private conscience.

Sarah revolts by moving her household goods and her family into the new barn her husband has built. Although he has promised ever since their marriage to provide a new

home for her, he has never done so. She therefore decides to act for herself, choosing a day when her husband is "providentially" away. Sarah believes that God is on her side; when the minister arrives with his predictably feeble remonstrances, she is so confident that she will not even discuss her act. "I've made it the subject of prayer, an' it's betwixt me an' the Lord and Adoniram," she affirms. The order in which she places the parties concerned may reflect more than just bad grammar. She continues, "I've got my own mind an' my own feet, an' I'm goin' to think my own thoughts an' go my own ways, an' nobody but the Lord is goin' to dictate to me unless I've a mind to have him" (p. 365). The poor clergyman finds himself superfluous; Sarah does not need him to interpret the Lord's will for her.

Mrs. Freeman underlines the moral heroism of Sarah's action by drawing parallels between her and "one of the New Testament saints" (p. 453), superimposing upon this image that of an immovable substance, first "one of the rocks in . . . pasture-land, bound to the earth with generations of blackberry-vines" (p. 449), and then Plymouth Rock, with its connotations of the Pilgrim Fathers and their firm religious convictions. Sarah has set herself against the majority, affirming her willingness to suffer and endure for her personal religious principles.

The community gathers outside the barn in order to witness the retribution that is about to fall upon this

rebel, wondering "more how Adoniram Penn would deal with his wife than how the Lord would" (p. 465). No sympathy on their part is suggested by the author; Sarah's act is seen as proof of eccentricity, if not outright insanity. But Sarah triumphs; whether or not the Lord was on her side, the sheer force of her conviction is too much for her husband to oppose. Mrs. Freeman deftly turns the tables at the end by showing Adoniram sitting on the back steps after supper, weeping quietly; one may be moved to pity this vanquished old man in spite of his previous unpleasantness. Sarah, armed with her own private conscience, is the kind of victor who throws her weaker foes into pathetic relief. The story is more convincing because we are able to feel just a little sorry for her husband.

Not all the consciences of which Mrs. Freeman writes reflect the owner's personal convictions of what is right and just. She shows several examples of the terrible power of a social conscience so firmly implanted that any attempt to move outside its boundaries may be shattering to both mind and body.

"Calla-Lilies and Hannah" (A New England Nun) is a good example of the depiction of a personality that is psychologically affected by a strict New England conscience. Hannah Redman, accused of theft, is a social outcast. Since she is shielding her lover, the true culprit, Hannah refuses to defend herself. Although she has been dismissed from church membership, she continues

to attend meeting despite the curious and condemning eyes of the congregation. The one man who knows she is innocent is the father of her lover. His silence stems not so much from the desire to protect his son, who has left home, as from a pride that makes him unwilling to acknowledge relationship to a thief. He is, after all, a respected church deacon. The presence of the deacon and Hannah in the same congregation is an ironic juxtaposition; one is a godly-appearing old man who is reverenced by the parish, while the other is an apparently bold and unrepentant sinner who should be ashamed to show her face. The people of this community judge inward character by outward appearance, and they judge wrongly.

Secure in the possession of a clear conscience, Hannah is able for a long time to withstand her ostracism; she is sustained by a feeling of moral righteousness even when she is refused work and when her body is weak from insufficient food. Yet the continued strain of social isolation finally overcomes her, coupled with the concern for the old woman who lives with her. "Suddenly in her weakness a half delirious fancy took possession of her. She seemed to be thinking other people's thoughts of herself instead of her own. 'There's that Hannah Redman . . . the girl that stole. . . . She's down as low as she can be; if she wants anything, why doesn't she steal? It's all over with her. People can't think any worse of her than they do now" (p. 113). Impelled by this sequence of thought,

Hannah steals a loaf of bread for the old woman's supper. The isolation she has endured for so long has finally broken her spirit. She is very different from the heroine of a moral treatise who would undoubtedly allow her entire family to starve rather than providing them with stolen food. Hannah is realistically presented not as an impossibly angelic protagonist but as a human being who is naturally affected by ostracism. Mrs. Freeman seems to be showing here that people need the good will of at least a few others in order to maintain psychological health. Hannah steals partly because she is spiritually starved.

She is beset almost immediately by her conscience. Her grim satisfaction at watching Martha eat her supper gives way to an attack of hysteria when George, her suitor, unexpectedly returns. "It's dreadful! I've got to tell you! . . . Oh, what shall I do? . . . It's all over . . . I stole. I did, George, I did!" (p. 117) What she took--a loaf of bread--is of course trivial in comparison with George's theft of money from his father. Yet she is ready to publicly confess her "terrible" sin; George, however, refuses to allow her to demean herself. "I've paid them for the bread. . . . Hannah, never think of this again. They're paid" (p. 118). He recognizes that payment has already been exacted through the suffering Hannah has endured; she owes society nothing further. Besides, by condemning her without waiting for proof of her guilt, the community has been in part responsible for her act. Whether

Hannah ever understands her situation more rationally is not made clear. The New England conscience, unalleviated by reason or common sense, may damage even a strong character such as hers. She can endure being apparently guilty, at least for a time, so long as she is not actually going against her moral upbringing.

The "lilies" in the story appear first as a rather obvious motif emphasizing Hannah's purity; she is "graceful rather than awkward . . . as if her whole slender body bent from her feet, lily fashion" (p. 102). Martha's constant complaint that no one ever comes in to admire her calla-lilies is also a rather forced allusion to Hannah's ostracism. The image gains more effectiveness at the end of the story when George is helping the two women move their belongings into his wagon. Martha orders, "You jest lift them lilies in first, afore I git in . . . an' be real keerful you don't break 'em. The stalks is tender" (p. 120). Like the lilies, Hannah is fragile despite her apparent fortitude, and she has almost been broken by the rough handling of society.

The destructive effect of a firmly implanted social conscience emerges as the basic theme of Mrs. Freeman's first novel, Jane Field.[7] Jane poses as her dead sister, Esther Maxwell, in order to obtain an inheritance she believes should have been hers. She is presented not as an impostor whose motives are based on greed, but as a rebel against human injustice. She is convinced that

she has a moral right to the property in question, saying that "there are a good many things that's wicked, an' sometimes I think some things ain't wicked that we've always thought was. I don't know but the Lord meant everybody to have what belonged to them in spite of everything" (p. 32). This rebellious attitude is, however, not strong enough to enable her to break free of her rigid moral conditioning. Once she has made her decision, she senses her isolation from the community; she goes to meeting as usual but is conscious of a difference between her and the accustomed surroundings. "She looked at the white walls of the audience-room, the pulpit, the carpet, the pews. She noted the familiar faces of the people in their Sunday gear, the green light stealing through the long blinds, and all these accustomed sights gave her a sense of awful strangeness and separation" (p. 55). Although the novel begins well with the tension between Jane's rebellious decision and her stern conscience, it moves too completely away from psychological development and into external action; this shift is one of the main faults of the book. Only at the end does the focus return to the mind of the heroine. Jane confesses, unable to bear her guilt any longer:

> "I shouldn't have had a cent. I stole it. I thought my daughter would die if we didn't have it an' get away from Green River; but that wa'n't any excuse. Edward Maxwell had that fifteen hundred dollars of my husband's, an' I never had a cent of it; but that wa'n't any excuse. . . . I ain't spent a cent of the money; it's all put away just as it was paid in, in a sugar-bowl in the china-closet;

> but that ain't any excuse. I took it on myself to do justice instead of the Lord, an' that ain't for any human bein' to do. . . ."
>
> (p. 259)

Not content with this revelation, Jane goes through the village, knocking on every door, and repeating her formula of penance: "I ain't Esther Maxwell." For the rest of her life she continues to make this statement whenever she meets a stranger. It is as though she has determined to confess her sin before the entire world. Jane Field is no longer entirely sane. Her confessional phrase signifies, symbolically, that she has lost part of her personality; she introduces herself, so to speak, in reverse, as though not quite certain who she is. In trying to break out of the rigid pattern of her strict upbringing, Jane has experienced a psychological dislocation of identity.

An even more severe penalty for disobeying one's conscience occurs in "A Village Singer" (A New England Nun). Candace Whitcomb, passionately resentful of the new soprano who has supplanted her in the village choir, rebels by staying at home and singing so loudly that her rival in the meeting-house nearby is drowned out. This act might seem mere spite, except that Mrs. Freeman has shown Candace's point of view as partly justifiable. The old woman, who has sung faithfully in the choir for many years and whose voice is still true, is being pushed aside to make room for someone younger, and she is understandably hurt and resentful. Her rebellion is, however, too much for "the

delicate wontedness of her whole life" (p. 33). Although she is able at first to ignore the remonstrances of the minister (who tactfully pretends that the whole thing was an unfortunate accident), she finds the shock of her defiance too much to endure, and she falls ill and dies, literally burnt out by the fire of her fury. To defy her neighbors, to interrupt a church service, to maintain her rebelliousness even in the presence of the clergyman whom she has always respected--all this is too much for her; it goes contrary to everything she has been taught. At the end she is repentant: "I hope the Lord will--forgive me," she murmurs as she lies on her deathbed. She even asks her rival to sing "Jesus, Lover of my Soul" for her before she dies. This apparent capitulation is to be given an ironic twist, however. "Candace lay and listened. Her face had a holy and radiant expression. When Alma stopped singing it did not disappear, but she looked up and spoke. . . . 'You flatted a little on--soul,' said Candace" (p. 36). It is the rebel who has the last word, experiencing a final moment of triumph after all.

Hannah Redman, Candace Whitcomb, Jane Field--all these heroines are victims of the New England conscience, bound to a strict code of behavior from which they cannot free themselves without mental or physical damage. Driven to rebel against social injustice, they may try to justify their actions for a time, but they cannot convince themselves that they are anything but sinners. Their only relief lies in the conventional ritual of confession and penance, a

ritual that Hawthorne used so powerfully in The Scarlet Letter. I want to point out here an important difference in the emphasis of these two authors. Hawthorne upholds the moral necessity of cleansing the soul through the public admission of guilt; only when his tortured Dimmesdale stands upon the scaffold with evidence of his sin made plain to everyone can he free himself of his burden. The desire of Mrs. Freeman's characters to expose themselves upon the scaffold, however, is evidence in her eyes of a neurotic and destructive compulsion that gives benefit to no one. Jane Field is not relieved of any distress by her repeated confession, for she is not entirely in her right mind. Hannah's frantic cries about the bread she stole and the necessity for letting everyone know about it are scarcely rational. Conscience in the stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman is not an admirable force but an element that can actually be immoral, if it is social and not private. The urge to confess, as she depicts it, is not a necessary part of moral rehabilitation. To return to The Scarlet Letter, Mrs. Freeman's heroic rebels resemble Hester Prynne in that they are free of the social conditioning of their society; they are able to decide for themselves what is right or wrong. Her defeated protagonists are more like Dimmesdale, who was tormented by guilt until he made a public confession. He was never capable of agreeing with Hester that what they did "had a consecration of its own."[8] It is interesting that those critics who

compare Mrs. Freeman with Hawthorne have overlooked her reversal of certain aspects of Hawthornian morality, particularly with regard to the conscience. For example, Westbrook avers that Mrs. Freeman owed her "confession" motif to Hawthorne but fails to explain the way in which her treatment of this theme differs from that found in The Scarlet Letter.[9]

In these stories of rebellion and conscience, the pattern usually involves a breach between the non-conforming individual and the established church congregation. In each case the protagonist is actively seeking a right relationship with God and is isolated from his fellows, who are concerned only with the observance of formalistic piety and who never think about establishing a closer tie with the Deity. For them, God is a being with whom they communicate once a week in church, meanwhile casting a glance or two at their neighbors to make sure that all this piety is making an impression. Mrs. Freeman presents at least twice the ironic juxtaposition of individual and group, revealing a scene in which the rebel is physically a part of the congregation and yet is separate from it. Hannah Redman, dismissed for alleged dishonesty, continues to attend church even though she is barred from taking Communion. As the story progresses, it becomes evident that she has the most right of all to worship God, and that certain members of this pious congregation do not even deserve to be present. Jane Field illustrates this situation in reverse; outwardly she is no different from

the rest of the gathering, but--having made up her mind to commit a sin--she looks about her with a sense of total isolation. The meeting-house was supposedly the most central part of the community; it is fitting that Mrs. Freeman should use it as the background for her religious rebels who, by their actions, demonstrate that the church is actually very far from God.

More often these rebels signify their disillusion with the meeting-house by worshipping elsewhere. These characters find their own special place in which to seek God--or else to defy him--rather than showing themselves in church. Rather than finding consolation in the house of God, they will seek their own sanctuary. Some worship in their own peculiar fashion. Esther Gay's sharp features and sharper knitting-needles provide a compact--and prickly--shelter within which she carries out her own version of Sabbath-keeping. Luella Norcross, criticized for not attending meeting, opens her door and her heart daily to tramps, pedlars and gipsies; she makes her own house a place in which true charity is dispensed. Other rebels withdraw into themselves. Ann Millet uses her deafness as a barrier, while Sarah Reed is pictured living on a barren, rocky island that parallels her own grim agnosticism; she is linked to the mainland by a very shaky and unstable bridge. Still others celebrate a ritual of anti-worship. Jane Muzzy sends up not the incense of devotion but the reek of boiling lard, expressing thus her anger against a God who

has apparently forsaken her. Candace Whitcomb, set aside by a congregation that refuses to let her praise God with her voice, misuses hymns by employing them to interrupt the Sunday services with discordant music. One might extend this rejection of the house of God to include the rebellion of Sarah Penn. Sarah rejects the Biblical injunction that the wife should be subject to the husband; she leaves his "sacred" hearth (a revered nineteenth century institution) to establish a home of her own choosing. Each of these revolts represents an arraignment of meaningless religious codes. The church is dying, and--in the words of Emerson--"the soul of the community is sick and faithless."[10]

The society that Mrs. Freeman presents is quite unable to understand that the individual's own dwelling might be as much of a "house of God" as the meeting-house. They fail to see that they themselves constitute the church, so that if they have lost vigor and Christian charity, the doors of the building might as well be locked. In almost every story I have discussed in this chapter, the community is presented in a framework of shallow and formalistic piety, dedicated only to outward appearances--attending meeting, wearing respectable garb, keeping a strict Sabbath. In addition, they are overconcerned with self-adornment, as though eager to show that God has rewarded their virtue by showering material benefits upon them. One by one, the representatives of this pious group are unmasked. Luella

Norcross's sister is conscious at meeting not of the presence of God but the set of her new and fashionable bonnet. Mrs. Stone is quick to recite platitudes of comfort to Ann Millet, so long as she is not required to offer any tangible assistance. Candace Whitcomb's fellow choir members would rather demonstrate their progressiveness by acquiring a new lead soprano than try to consider the feelings of the rejected one. Adoniram Penn mutters a blessing at every meal, but would rather build greater barns (like the man in Christ's parable) than pay attention to the needs of his family. The deacon who helped to turn Hannah Redman out of the church is a hypocrite. All these characters care only for external appearances; it is ironic that they represent a good Christian society.

The minister, as official spokesman for the church, is made a feeble instrument in Mrs. Freeman's fiction. He possesses none of the fire bequeathed by Jonathan Edwards; he and his fellows are, in the words of Pattee, "spineless and effeminate."[11] Their mild protests have no effect upon the rebels, who are aware that repeating formulas is not the way to communicate with God. Freeman clergy follow one of two modes: they are either young and earnestly hopeful that their newly acquired store of inspiration and holy ammunition will convince the sturdiest unbeliever, or else they are older, dull of mind, and unable to see beyond their pulpits sufficiently to cope with any real moral crisis. Their lack of differentiation is not necessarily a sign of

poor characterization. Mrs. Freeman may be deliberately showing that it is difficult to distinguish one minister from another, since they are all copies of the same pattern that Emerson deplored in his "Divinity School Address." The clergymen of Mary Wilkins Freeman might have been expressly inspired by Emerson's description of the preacher who almost turned him against church: "He had lived in vain. He had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it."[12] As religious leaders such men are failures. Mrs. Freeman's fiction contains many of these ineffectual creatures who cannot shock their congregations out of the placid routines of worship, and who are helpless when confronted with those few individuals who are trying to think for themselves and who are more concerned with confronting a personal God than with meekly accepting a Deity that society has created in its own image.

NOTES

Epigraphs: 1. "The Divinity School Address," in Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. 113. 2. From the records of the trial of Anne Hutchinson, cited in David D. Hall, ed., The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638 (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), p. 337.

[1] "Divinity School Address," Selections, p. 115.

[2] Warren, p. 164.

[3] Parrington, p. 66.

[4] Brooks, p. 472.

[5] Westbrook, p. 53.

[6] "Self-Reliance," Selections, p. 149.

[7] Jane Field: A Novel (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893). All further citations to Jane Field will be to this text.

[8] The Scarlet Letter, introd. Austin Warren (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1963), p. 188.

[9] Westbrook, p. 47.

[10] "Divinity School Address," Selections, p. 111.

[11] "The Terminal Moraine," Sidelights, p. 204.

[12] "Divinity School Address," Selections, p. 109.

CHAPTER IV

> A man should be a man, and not a door-mat. It is the worst thing in the world for people to walk over him and trample him. It does them much more harm than it does him.
>
> --Mary Wilkins Freeman

> Could I for one moment forget myself the serpent might not abide within me. It is my diseased self-contemplation that has engendered and nourished him.
>
> --Nathaniel Hawthorne

In the previous chapters I have dealt with Mrs. Freeman's presentation of protagonists who assert themselves against certain ideals upheld by their society: benevolence, matrimony, formalistic piety. I am now turning from the more particular aspects of social nonconformity in order to discuss two extreme ways in which certain Freeman characters react to their environment. They may either surrender altogether and deny themselves any sanctuary at all, or else they may erect defenses against the world so efficiently that they create an isolating prison. As Mrs. Freeman demonstrates, both attitudes are destructive to the spirit. Although a great deal of attention has been given to Barney and Deborah Thayer of Pembroke as prisoners

of their own stubborn self-will, critics have overlooked other characters who are just as badly off because they have relinquished their sense of identity altogether. In this chapter I am focusing on both extremes of behavior in order to demonstrate that Mary Wilkins Freeman's view of ideal courage involves a concern for both one's self and others. She may defend characters who are social non-conformists and rebels, but she does not thereby maintain that the individual should dwell apart from society. The only exceptions she sets forth are the nunlike figures of Louisa Ellis and Caroline Munson, who are temperamentally suited to their seclusion. There is a definite place for love in Mrs. Freeman's world, and she shows that the totally unselfish and the totally selfish are equally incapable of understanding what such affection involves.

I shall deal first with those Freeman protagonists who surrender completely to the established maxim that unselfishness is one of the highest ideals. Self-sacrifice, in the nineteenth century, was a laudable virtue--especially for women. The unmarried maiden owed a duty to her parents, the bride was required to obey her husband, and the mother had the opportunity, in devoting her life utterly to her children, to become the highest type of domestic saint. Popular literature of the period reinforced these ideals. One need only look at the "Elsie" series, which follows the heroine from childhood through marriage and motherhood to her ultimate transfiguration as a revered and widowed grandmother; here is a self-effacing heroine who receives

her reward. Beneath all the socially approved altruism and the suppression of what was considered the wicked and prideful self is an unhealthy streak of masochism. In The Sentimental Novel in America, Herbert Ross Brown comments, "The impulses which prompted self-abnegation were rarely free from the taint of exhibitionism and a selfish indulgence in the feelings."[1] A repellent little moral tale of the period, "What Bunny Cotton Did," tells of a mother rabbit who makes a nest for her litter by pulling out bits of her own fur; the story dwells upon the pain and loss of blood endured by this noble example of maternal affection. The sentimentalized picture of unselfish suffering, if regarded from another point of view, becomes a scene of vampirism with the victim eagerly offering its body to be drained. It is the latter perspective that Mrs. Freeman imparts to her sketches of protagonists who give themselves up for the sake of others.

On the surface, "A Modern Dragon" (A Humble Romance) could be read as a story of praiseworthy maternal affection in which the heroine is ready to sacrifice her life for her child in the best sentimental tradition. Mrs. King, a widow who manages her own farm, has dedicated herself to providing every possible comfort for her daughter Almira. The girl is utterly spoiled, while the mother denies herself all luxuries. Mrs. King is eventually informed that her unfeminine dress and her failure to attend church are ruining the matrimonial chances of her daughter. She at

once adopts a surface conformity; she covers her cropped hair with a switch, lengthens her skirts, and appears at meeting, innocently hopeful that this capitulation will bring back the errant suitor. She humbles herself further by pleading with the suitor's mother, whose narrow-minded attitude is chiefly responsible for the breaking-off of the love affair. Mrs. King's efforts are all futile; her health declines and she dies, with the lovers reconciled at her deathbed.

The folly of this "noble" sacrifice is evident if the story is read more closely. Mrs. Freeman depicts the daughter as a doll-like creature who is dressed in fine clothes and kept in the parlor, amused with "sugar-plums and a child's paper" (p. 67) while her mother does all the housework. The vicarious pleasure Mrs. King takes in treating her daughter like a doll is evident, but it is a pleasure dearly bought. As the author points out, Almira is not consciously selfish, but she has no idea of responsibility even though she is of marriageable age. Once Mrs. King decides that it is time to find a husband for Almira, the tragedy is initiated. Almira--a pirouetting and simpering doll, turning round and round to admire herself in the glass--belongs in the parlor with her sugarplums. However innocently, she is draining the energy of her mother; she is to be the cause of Mrs. King's sacrifice of both self-respect and life.

Mrs. King's reaction to the "dragon," the mother

who has forbidden her son to court Almira, is submission rather than defiance. To this woman, whose surface piety masks a selfish and devouring nature, she sacrifices her accustomed way of living--one that was based upon her own preference and her common sense. "I know I ain't looked an' dressed jest like other folks; but now I'm a-doin' different. . . . I've been to meetin' too, an' I'm goin' right along" (p. 75). This backing-down is all in vain; her spirit broken, Mrs. King falls ill. A death-wish, conscious or otherwise, is implicit in her final words to David, the suitor: "I've been betwixt you an' Almiry . . . an' thar didn't seem to be no way of settin' it right but this" (p. 76). There is an almost ludicrous lack of proportion in a woman's dying to promote a happy marriage for her daughter--an incongruity particularly glaring in this story, whose ending is anything but promising. Almira at the conclusion flings away David's hand and cries, "Oh, mother! mother! mother! . . . I love you best! I do love you best! . . . I never will love him as much as I did you. I promise you" (p. 77). This speech provides an ominous note upon which to begin the marriage; it points up the irony and futility of Mrs. King's long period of maternal sacrifice. Almira is still the doll who can only cry "mama."

Another popular form of self-immolation, this time for the all-important lover or husband, is dissected in "Robins and Hammers" (A Humble Romance). Lois Arms, convinced that she should not marry until she can provide

her husband with the New England equivalent of a dowry--silk dresses and furniture--postpones the marriage without explanation and obtains a job teaching school. As a result, she has to struggle under the double burden of earning money and enduring estrangement from her bewildered and angry lover. There is no real necessity for such martyr-like behavior; Lois has seized upon the dowry as an excuse for self-denial. The unconscious masochism of her motives is suggested at the beginning of the story with Lois pausing at her domestic tasks to look out at the beauty of the spring day--and then shutting the door firmly. "Lois took her broom and went about her work. She had been brought up on the rigid New England plan, and had a guilty feeling that it was a waste of time if she stopped a minute to be happy" (p. 120). This motif is carried through in her decision to postpone the wedding; she shuts the door not only on the sounds of the robins but also on the noise of the hammers that have been building her new home. The author adds that "they were of the same kind to her; both sounds belonged to love and hope and the spring" (p. 119). Indeed, she has shut the door almost irrevocably; her John orders the carpenters to stop work on the house and vows never to go near Lois again. This heroine comes perilously close to ruining her future happiness altogether, as if she actually wished to do so. She treads with martyrlike patience "past the wild roses again, then the golden-rod and asters, then the red maple boughs, then the snow-drifts,

back and forth between her home and the schoolhouse" (p. 129). The seasons of the out-of-doors she once loved are all the same to her now, for she moves in a different track.

John returns when he hears that Lois is ill. Worn out by both physical and mental distress, she confesses her project. His reaction is blunt: "What do you think I care about the dresses and the furniture? I wish they were in Gibraltar! . . . You meant all right, but it was all wrong. You've most killed yourself" (p. 133). His words are like a blast of fresh air in the midst of all this stifling martyrdom and self-denial. Lois's sacrifice is shown for what it is--silly and useless. To nearly kill oneself in order to come to one's husband with silk dresses and furniture reflects the same lack of perspective that Mrs. King shows in being literally "willin' to die" in order to make Almira eligible for the marriage market.

Both Lois and Mrs. King attempt to express their love for others by producing material gifts gained through self-sacrificial labor. And both overlook the necessary recognition of the loved one as a person with psychological and spiritual needs. Mrs. King clothes Almira's body with luxuries but ignores the responsibility of helping her to develop into a mature adult. Lois shuts John out of her life for the duration of her martyrdom, never explaining why. She seems to see her lover as a static being who can be set aside and then picked up once again, unchanged by neglect. Mrs. Freeman shows in these stories that it is

necessary to treat the object of one's affection as an individual, not as a lifeless figure to be dressed prettily or set aside on a shelf. The attractiveness of martyrdom obscures this view; it is all too easy to forget the needs of the other person while indulging oneself in an attitude of noble suffering. Such "unselfishness" is demonstrated here to be not a virtue but a sin, whether it is inspired by a New England upbringing or by a reading of sentimental novels.

This attitude of self-denial is even more futile when it is directed toward a dead person. "A Taste of Honey" (A Humble Romance) has as its theme the preoccupation of Inez Morse with her dead father, and with the promise she made him about paying off the mortgage. "There was at times a perfect agony of pity in her heart over her father. It made no difference to her that all his earthly troubles were over for him now. When she thought over how he had toiled and worried and denied himself for the sake of owning their little farm clear, and then had to die without seeing it accomplished, it seemed as if she could not bear it. The pitiful spectacle of her poor, dull father working all his life for such a small aim in such small ways, in vain, haunted her" (pp. 102-103). In a simple but effective bit of symbolism, the author points out Inez's obsession with the dead by depicting her as she makes ready the unused parlor in order to entertain her lover. "Inez opened the parlor, which was never used, and swept and dusted it. . . .

It had never been opened since her father's funeral. When she first unclosed the door to-day she seemed to see the long coffin in the middle of the floor, where it had rested then" (p. 98). This passage is not simply a digression that introduces a bit of local color concerned with courtship and funeral customs. The New England parlor is given more significant overtones by providing a focus for Inez's attempt to efface the memory of her father by substituting the presence of her suitor.

The dead man, however, succeeds in driving out the living one. Inez postpones her marriage indefinitely because she feels it necessary to carry out her deathbed promise to her father. The image of the coffin in the parlor suggests the continued presence of the dead and the consequent draining of Inez's energy. Much like Lois Arms, she conceives the project without any urging on the part of the beneficiary. "'Father,' says I, 'don't you worry. I'll pay up that mortgage.' 'You can't, Inez,' says he. 'Yes, I will,' says I; 'I promise you, father'" (pp. 101-102). Like Lois, Inez seems to embrace the opportunity to suffer. What she does cannot possibly benefit her father now, and by insisting on paying the debt she destroys her chances of a happy marriage. It is not surprising that her suitor (pushed aside to wait like Lois's John) eventually tires of his position and marries someone else. Inez is so involved with her pose as the dutiful daughter that she loses the opportunity to share affection with a living person who can return her love.

A similar denial of identity occurs in "Cinnamon Roses" (A Humble Romance). Elsie Mills, a drab little spinster, has lived all her life in the shadow of her lovely sister Lucina, obtaining vicarious pleasure from Lucina's beauty and large following of suitors. Elsie has never given a thought to herself as an individual; "I wa'n't nothin' side of Luciny," she comments without rancor (p. 177). She has never considered the possibility of attracting lovers: "When I got to thinkin' about anything of this kind, I always put Luciny in instead of me" (p. 179). Even after her sister is dead, Elsie is still the faithful devotee, tending jealously the hedge of cinnamon roses that Lucina once planted about the front door. Forced to leave her home, Elsie is nearly insane with grief, so accustomed has she become to her role of priestess at the shrine of the dead. When the new owner announces his intention of cutting down the cinnamon roses, Elsie steals his sickle. The theft is humorously treated, with Elsie stealing across the field at night as timorously as the heroine of a Gothic novel. Behind the apparent lightness of the situation, however, lies the near-tragic reality of Elsie's obsession with her dead sister. So involved is she with Lucina that she cannot recognize herself as a potentially lovable person.

Elsie is resentful toward William, the new owner of the house; she sees him as a discarded suitor of her sister and thinks that he has returned to buy the house out of spite. When he confesses that she, not Lucina, was

always the woman he loved, she is incredulous. Her first thought is that his love for her slights the memory of the dead girl. Mrs. Freeman does not give details of Elsie's subsequent mental processes, but this heroine eventually makes the amusing yet touching admission that she might agree to marry William if she "could get used to thinkin' of it" (p. 179). They are married, and Mrs. Freeman ends the tale with the ambiguous statement that "the bridal couple . . . did not enter at the front door. They passed around to the side one, because the front yard was so full of cinnamon roses" (p. 179). Lucina's roses remain, as if to signal that Lucina's memory still pervades the house and the mind of her sister. It may not be easy for William to dispose of the ghost completely, since Elsie has had a lifetime of living only through the personality of her sister. The dead girl remains as a vampire who may continue to feed on Elsie's vitality.

In contrast to these tales of self-destructive love is "Louisa" (A New England Nun), whose heroine refuses to offer herself so readily upon the altar of family duty. Louisa, somewhat like Mrs. King, does man's work in the fields in order to support her mother and senile grandfather. Louisa's mother wants the girl to marry Jonathan, a well-off neighbor, and exerts constant pressure upon her daughter to encourage him by acting in a more feminine manner. The mother's position may seem partly justified, since the family exists on very little, but Mrs. Freeman reveals a

less worthy motivation behind the ambitions of this woman. To begin with, she knows that Louisa dislikes Jonathan; yet she affirms that this does not matter. She is willing to push Louisa into a marriage of convenience in order that she, Mrs. Britton, may rise socially. She calculates how long it will be before Jonathan's mother dies, imagining herself "installed in that large white house as reigning dowager" (p. 395). Her loss of pride at seeing her daughter doing man's work is also more painful than any pangs of starvation. If Mrs. Britton is materialistic and selfishly ambitious, Louisa appears not as an undutiful daughter but as an individual struggling for independence. That she should give herself up in order to feed her mother's vanity and avarice is demonstrated to be undesirable. She is not unattractive in her role as farm laborer; her skin is brown and her hair is roughened, but her face has "a clear bright look from being exposed to the moist wind" (p. 387). Her surroundings are pleasant rather than squalid. "A strong wind, full of moisture, was blowing from the east. The smell of the sea was in it, although this was some miles inland. Louisa's brown calico skirt blew out in it like a sail. It beat her in the face when she raised her head" (p. 386). There is a vigorous if unconventional beauty about Louisa in her outdoor setting.

Jonathan appears from time to time with gifts of farm produce, but Louisa is not to be lured even with the honey that he offers her. Mrs. Britton having complained

that she cannot relish her food, Louisa makes a special trip to town in order to buy her mother some herring--a delicacy she enjoys. With the dish of honey, and all that it promises, before her, the mother rejects Louisa's gift: "What in creation smells so kinder strong an' smoky in here?" (p. 393). This incident, with its conflicting odors of honey and herring, is amusing, but it points up a serious undercurrent in the story. Mrs. Britton would rather accept a free gift than an offering that represents her daughter's independent labor; she is unable to forgive Louisa for rejecting the man with the honey. The herring is a product of Louisa's honest affection for her mother; the honey is a lure by which the calculating Jonathan hopes to obtain a wife. Mrs. Britton cannot distinguish between true and false love.

Louisa eventually decides to go to her uncle and ask for assistance, not through any lessening of her independent spirit, but through her conviction that family members should share responsibilities. "This old man was her mother's nearest relative. He had property and to spare. Should she survive him, it would be hers, unless willed away. She, with her unsophisticated sense of justice, had a feeling that he ought to help her" (p. 403). The uncle, somewhat grudgingly, gives her a large quantity of food, making the blunt stipulation that she must leave what she cannot carry away by herself. Louisa performs an unusual feat of endurance in the blazing heat of the sun.

"She took up the bag of meal and the basket of eggs and carried them out to the gate; then she returned, got the flour and ham, and went with them to a point beyond. Then she returned for the meal and eggs, and carried them past the others. In that way she traversed the seven miles home. The heat increased. She had eaten nothing since morning but the apples that her friend had given her. Her head was swimming, but she kept on. Her resolution was as immovable under the power of the sun as a rock" (p. 404). In the conventional context this might seem evidence of a martyrlike self-sacrifice on the part of a heroine who was willing to endure great agonies for the sake of her starving family. But Louisa's efforts here are just the reverse; she is acting out a kind of demonstration of her determination to care for her family in her own way. "It was like a pilgrimage, and the Mecca at the end of the burning, desert-like road was her own maiden independence" (p. 405). Her ordeal is at the same time an expression of her affection and concern for her loved ones and a celebration of her refusal to demonstrate her love for them in the traditional self-immolating manner.

One might contrast this story with "A Wayfaring Couple" (A New England Nun) in which a somewhat parallel feat of endurance takes place, for just the opposite reasons. Minty, the pretty wife with the dubious moral background, gets her stricken husband to a doctor by placing him in a cart and drawing him by her own efforts along the

highway. Mrs. Freeman accedes to convention here by saying explicitly that such self-sacrifice has a redemptive value. "She, dragging her sick husband over the rough country road, like a beast of burden, was as perfect a woman as she ever would be in this world. She seemed to rise triumphant by this noble abasement from any lower level where she might have been" (p. 135). With this moral tag, the story is only a conventional working out of the established tenet that sacrifice is ennobling--an ideal that the author has more often shown to be false.

In the majority of her tales of self-sacrifice, Mary Wilkins Freeman demonstrates that so-called "unselfish" love has unhappy results. Rather than nourishing or sustaining the spirit, it may destroy the vitality of all those involved. Suggestions of lifelessness abound throughout these stories. Mrs. King is chillingly specific about her death-wish. She has allowed Almira to sap her energy, and Almira is in turn a doll-like creature with no volition, a victim of this maternal "love." Lois Arms seems to have made much the same commitment as Mrs. King; she first precipitates a situation that will drive away her suitor and then exhausts herself physically, as though she is more eager to die for love than to live for it. Both Inez Morse and Elsie Mills have created vampires from the bodies of their beloved dead, preferring to serve them as willing victims rather than to turn their affection toward people who can return it. A preoccupation with death seems to

be typical of these martyrs to self-sacrifice. Mrs. Freeman shows that such figures lack the capacity for real love; they cannot see themselves as lovable beings, and in addition do not perceive that affection for others involves more important responsibilities than supplying them with material things. That spoiling one's family is irresponsible and selfish is illustrated also in later stories, such as "The Selfishness of Amelia Lamkin"[2] and "Dear Annie,"[3] in which the author tends to moralize too overtly. In the first example, Amelia--a domestic doormat --falls ill, worn out through having devoted all her time to her exacting and pampered family. Her sister points out sharply that Amelia's so-called unselfishness is in fact a form of selfish indulgence that is doing harm to both her family and herself. She is ruining the other members of the household by not permitting them to share duties. In "Dear Annie," the heroine rebels by leaving home and thereby forcing her indolent and spoiled sisters to look after themselves. For Mrs. Freeman, love involves regarding others as responsible, or potentially responsible, individuals with whom one must share burdens as well as pleasures. Love is not treating others as petted creatures who must be sheltered from reality, or as puppets who have no feelings.

If Mrs. Freeman considers total surrender of identity to be indicative of selfishness rather than love, she shows also that it is possible to go too far in the

opposite direction. Complete self-assertion to the point of isolation from society is, in her view, equally as destructive as total surrender of self. Too much pride distorts the capacity of the individual for either healthy self-love or love of others. In order to maintain an ideally balanced self-integrity, Mrs. Freeman sees it as necessary to care for both oneself and other people. The person who gives up his own desires completely, and the person who shuts himself away from his fellows, are both guilty of upsetting this balance. The one misinterprets love as self-sacrifice; the other attempts to survive by excluding others altogether. I have already discussed the way in which Mrs. Freeman demonstrates that one cannot love others rightly without loving oneself. I shall now turn to stories in which she shows that too much love of self can turn to a canker in the breast--or a Hawthornian bosom serpent.

Mrs. Freeman's theme of antisocial obstinacy, especially as developed in Pembroke, has already been considered by her critics. Foster and Westbrook, as I have already mentioned, see her work as a study of neurotic types. It is my intention here to discuss the self-willed eccentrics of Freeman fiction in the wider context of the interaction between the individual and society, rather than linking them to a specific historical and geographical region. I see these characters not only as peculiar sketches inspired by the author's personal background, but

as figures who stand at the opposite extreme from those who glory in self-sacrifice. By placing them in this perspective, I intend to show that they are more than just a group of New England grotesques. I intend also to consider them apart from the background of Puritan theology that Westbrook in particular seems to consider vital to an appreciation of their value. It is true that certain Freeman characters rationalize their obstinacy by linking it to the supposed will of God, but the author shows that this attitude is only an excuse for imposing their own will upon other people.

The crochety New Englander, who would "rather be mad" than be placated, appears in some of Mrs. Freeman's tales as an apparently comic local type. In "Christmas Jenny" there is a sequence in which Jonas Carey, who has slipped and fallen three times on the ice, sits and sulks in front of his house, impervious to the pleas of his wife, who is afraid he will "freeze down." Jenny, who is visiting the couple, comments that she does not know whom Jonas thinks he is spiting by sitting there, and Mrs. Carey replies that it must be Providence. Jenny retorts, "I reckon Providence don't much care where he sets" (p. 165). This sketch of a childish and bad-tempered man is amusing on one level, yet it reveals an unpleasant personality; Jonas is willing to spite his wife (who is worried about him), himself (since it is a freezing day), and possibly Providence--all because the universe is not willing to accommodate itself to him personally. Even over such a

trivial matter as slipping on the ice, he is ready to isolate himself from the warmth of human companionship; this little man possesses a mighty ego, and he cares only about pampering it. As Anthony Hilfer puts it, "The old man both correlates and contrasts with the natural scene about him. He is as emotionally frozen as the ice but lacks the dazzle. His sole governing principle is spite."[4] Jonas is spiritually akin to Cephas Barnard of Pembroke, who obstinately tries to make pies out of sorrel, refusing to admit that some of his dietary notions are impractical. Cephas's culinary efforts are humorous, yet they contribute to the serious background of the novel: the self-will that blinds the isolated individual to all else but his own importance.

The tragic potential of this selfish obstinacy comes into view as early as "Robins and Hammers" with the suitor, John, fighting his own inclinations; he is torn between his desire to go back to Lois and his resolution to avoid her. "He could not slacken his own tight rein over himself very easily at his own command. He had made up his mind never to go near Lois again, and he could not break his resolve. He tried, though. Many an evening . . . he dressed himself in his Sunday suit, and even started to go to see Lois; but he never went" (p. 130). Here is an anticipation of the situation existing between Barney and Charlotte in Pembroke. Even after he discovers that she is ill, John cannot overcome his will enough to visit her

right away, but after a day or two his concern for her finally breaks down the barrier. Regard for the well-being of others seems to be the key, in Mrs. Freeman's stories, to releasing oneself from an imprisoning and obstinate will. John's relenting because of his love for Lois prefigures Barney Thayer's breaking out of his rigid isolation through his concern for Charlotte.

"A Conflict Ended" (A Humble Romance) tells of Marcus Woodman, a prisoner of the vow he took long ago never to enter the meeting-house again. Ever since, he has carried out the letter of his intention by attending church each Sunday and sitting outside the building, on the steps. So rigidly has he become imprisoned in his "icy obstinacy" that he is literally unable to enter the church, even though he desires to do so. His automatic response to every suggestion is a negative, as his old sweetheart Esther discovers when she tries to make him accept her sun-shade on a particularly warm Sunday. Only when she gives up her demanding attitude, and concedes, "I don't know but it would look kinder queer, come to think of it" (p. 385), is he able to accept the favor. Contradiction is so much a part of his nature that he opposes every suggestion, no matter how trivial. The hottest sun cannot melt the ice within him. The strength in his face "that might have abashed mountains" has been misdirected, channeled in one direction only. Esther finally agrees to marry him, and on their bridal Sunday she offers to sit with him

on the steps of the meeting-house. Marcus faces a crisis. "He stood for a moment staring into her face. He trembled so that the bystanders noticed it. He actually leaned over towards his old seat as if wire ropes were pulling him down upon it. Then he stood up straight, like a man, and walked through the church door with his wife" (p. 398). Marcus has been led to forget himself through his love for Esther and his unwillingness to allow her to share his isolation and the consequent ridicule of the village. He is another spiritual brother of Barney Thayer, who conquers his pride when he sees that Charlotte is willing to endure social opprobrium for his sake.

The ice images that Mrs. Freeman uses to describe Jonas Carey and Marcus Woodman become an important motif in "A Solitary" (A New England Nun). Nicholas Gunn's lack of vital warmth is demonstrated in the first glimpse we have of him. "Nicholas sat on his door-step, and the snow fell upon him. His old cap had become a tall white crown; there was a ridge of snow upon his bent shoulders. He sat perfectly still; his eyes were fixed upon the weighted evergreens across the road, but he did not seem to see them. He looked as calmly passive beneath the storm as a Buddhist monk" (p. 215). Whatever Mrs. Freeman's idea of a Buddhist monk may have been, she makes it clear that Nicholas's icy passivity is not ideal, although he "would have been revered and worshipped as a saintly ascetic among some nations" (p. 222). He is cold and

unfeeling toward others and toward himself; he has achieved no serenity through his wilderness existence, but lives in an aura of grim obstinacy that forbids any peace of mind. His gradual alteration from rigid immobility to human warmth and compassion is effectively developed as a melting process. The semi-invalid Stephen, who is sent by his family daily on errands through the woods to the town, is the catalyst. On the first occasion of Stephen's request for a few minutes' shelter, Nicholas abruptly refuses; like Marcus Woodman, he responds to every situation with an automatic No. Yet when Stephen starts to walk away, Nicholas calls him back: "If you want to set in the house a few minutes, you can" (p. 217). He takes no further notice of his guest, continuing to sit in the doorway "like a stone image." This is the first step; the next day he takes the initiative and offers Stephen shelter. He is no longer a stone image; he shuts the door (with a bang) to keep the wind out and walks up and down "like a sentinel"; he is not so much guarding Stephen, apparently, as guarding himself from any demands upon his sympathy. But at least he has become mobile. The way is prepared for the night in which he builds a fire to thaw out the half-frozen little man, feeds him, and listens to his story. Because Stephen is unwell, his family is planning to send him to the poorhouse. The ice cracks and melts; Nicholas finally gives in. "I've fought against your comin' as long as I could, an' now you've come, an' I've turned the corner, you

are a-goin' to stay. When I've been walkin' in the teeth of my own will on one road, an' havin' all I could do to breast it, I ain't a-goin' to do it on another. I've give up, an' I'm a-goin' to stay give up. You lay still" (p. 229). Spite, not saintliness, was at the root of Nicholas's asceticism; his cottage did not represent a sanctuary but a prison as inimical to himself as to anyone else. Just as he is drawn to make his bleak dwelling warm for Stephen, he kindles a fire--against his will--in his own heart, and the warmth spreads through him as it does through the house. I think Mrs. Freeman overdoes the conversion of Nicholas by making him suddenly "radiant with kindness and delight." He is more convincing with his new-found benevolence still overlaid with grim independence: "I've give up, an' I'm a-goin' to stay give up." His attitude toward Stephen is sternness that masks compassion. "You are a-goin' to stay jest where you are," he says, making it an order (p. 229). He is like the house, warm and comfortable at the core now, but still covered with frost on the outside--a frost that "sparkled like diamonds" in the sunshine, lending the dwelling a kind of beauty.

In Pembroke,[5] her best novel, Mrs. Freeman presents several characters who have isolated themselves from others by allowing themselves to be overcome by an imprisoning obstinacy. Barney Thayer, the hero, is represented by several images that underline his great

separation from the community and his struggles to free himself from his own stubborn will. Barney may think at first that he must remain aloof from Charlotte and her family because of his vow "by the Lord Almighty," but Mrs. Freeman points out that vows made in God's name are not necessarily the result of God's will; "it was his own will which was his fate" (p. 110). As with Nicholas Gunn, the author links her hero with a symbolically empty and cheerless dwelling. This time it is the unfinished house in which Barney and Charlotte had intended to live after their marriage. (Again, "Robins and Hammers" anticipates this development.) At first, before the estranging quarrel, Barney peoples and furnishes the house with his dreams of the future--the bedroom that he will share with Charlotte, the sunny kitchen where she will have her rocking-chair, even the shadow on the parlor floor where one day his coffin will rest. He sees all as part of a happy and fulfilled life. This sense of completion is destroyed after the quarrel with Charlotte's father; Barney takes refuge in the unfinished dwelling, secluding himself from the rest of the community. Now it resembles the cold, bleak cottage of Nicholas Gunn, its happy future gone and replaced by loneliness and "fireless chimneys." It is a symbol of Barney's own life, not simply the place in which he dwells apart from the world.

The wintry images that Mrs. Freeman uses to depict the isolated soul come into view once more near the

conclusion of the novel, with the description of Barney cutting wood in the swamp. "He stood from morning till night hewing down the trees, which had gotten their lusty growth from the graves of their own kind. Their roots were sunken deep among and twined about the very bones of their fathers which helped make up the rich frozen soil of the great swamp. . . . Barney hewed wood in the midst of this white tangle of trees and bushes and vines, which were like a wild dumb multitude of death-things pressing over against him, trying to crowd him away" (pp. 312-313). This struggle, which Westbrook sees as symbolic of a fight between the hero and the remnants of decaying Calvinist doctrines in himself,[6] is also significant as a battle between the individual and his own icy, stubborn will. It is linked with Mrs. Freeman's other uses of the imagery of cold and frost that signify a soul frozen into isolation. It can, of course, also be taken as a reference to the heredity that has helped to establish Barney's obstinacy. His mother avers, "He's got some of me in him," and Deborah Thayer is of a composition that makes Plymouth Rock, by comparison, seem like cork. Barney's elemental struggle, "hewing asunder not only the sturdy fibres of oak but the terrible sinews of frost and winter, with many a tree . . . threatening stiffly like an old man of death" (p. 315), prefigures his own psychological conflict with the sinews of his will.

Barney Thayer is beset by a crippling rigidity.

that eventually affects his body as well as his mind. The motif of his bent back appears so close to the end of the novel that it seems hastily superimposed rather than properly integrated. Barney suddenly acquires a curved spine. "I've hurt my soul," he confesses to his rival, Thomas Payne. "It happened that Sunday night years ago. I--can't get over it. I am bent" (p. 297). If Barney has finally become aware that he is isolated because of his own stubborn pride and not because of the will of God, some preparation should have been made for this change in outlook. As it is, the bent back is too quickly introduced to the reader.

The outward, physical expression of Barney's inner deformity has already been presented in a more effective way. Richard, Barney's kinsman, is also a prisoner of spiritual rigidity, the result not so much of actively obstinate will as of firmly implanted habit. (His character somewhat resembles that of David Emmons in "Two Old Lovers.") When his sweetheart Sylvia is not at home on the night that Richard is accustomed to pay a call, he is thrown off his psychological schedule and experiences such a shock that he cannot make a rational response. He simply ceases to visit Sylvia at all. Half out of her mind with disappointment and grief, Sylvia hails Barney as he is passing by one evening, calling him "Richard" and imploring him to come back to her. It takes some time for her to recognize Barney. Barney perceives the parallel: "For the

moment he could not stir; he had a feeling of horror, as if he saw his own double. There was a subtle resemblance which lay deeper than the features between him and Richard Alger" (p. 171). Both are prisoners of their unbending wills. This episode would have provided a good opportunity for the author to have Barney realize that since he, like Richard, was imprisoned in a self-imposed rigidity, it was his own will and not the will of God that was to blame. Mrs. Freeman, however, has him draw no such conclusions. He sees the similarity but apparently does not learn from it.

Barney is finally shocked out of his isolation by Charlotte, who willingly goes to his house to nurse him through the illness he brought on himself by his struggle with the trees in the icy swamp. Charlotte is threatened with excommunication from the church for this "immoral" behavior. As soon as Barney realizes what is happening, he sends Charlotte home--and follows her, walking "as straight as anybody." Mrs. Freeman drew part of this story from an incident that occurred in her own family history.[7] She transformed it, however, into a very Hawthornian tale by introducing the motif of the physical deformity that could be cured only if the victim, like the hero of "Egotism: or the Bosom Serpent," could forget himself for the sake of another. In her introduction to the 1899 edition of Pembroke, Mary Wilkins Freeman wrote that the intention of this novel was "to prove the truth of a theory"

that a diseased will could be cured through "the capacity of the individual for a love which could rise above all consideration of self."[8]

The most extreme example of isolation in Pembroke, if not in all of the published work of Mrs. Freeman, occurs in the character of Deborah Thayer, the mother of Barney. At first it may seem that she is at the mercy of a New England conscience so unyielding that it would surpass the expectations of the most strict Puritan society imaginable. It soon appears, however, that she is not the victim of social conscience. Rather, Deborah has rewritten the existing moral code according to her own interpretation. Technically dedicated to following the letter of God's law (which she sees as Mosaic rather than Christian), Deborah is in fact using this dedication, however unconsciously, as an excuse for imposing her own will upon others, especially those of her household. As Westbrook points out, she is confusing her own will with Divine will.[9] She resembles her Old Testament namesake in that she acts as a judge; she also considers herself an earthly representative of the stern Jehovah who gave the Ten Commandments to Moses. Her life is expressed through the imagery of righteous battle; her eyes gleam "with warlike energy" as she listens to a reading of the Scriptures, for "she confused King David's enemies with those people who crossed her own will" (p. 3). When she has unsuccessfully clashed with Barney in an attempt to compel him to mend the quarrel with Cephas Barnard and

marry Charlotte, she forbids him to come home and goes from him "over the plough ridges with stern unyielding steps, as if they were her enemies slain in battle" (p. 103). Deborah's near-fanatic devotion to Divine justice leaves no room for human compassion. Barney is virtually disowned for his disobedience, even though he is a grown man. His sister Rebecca, discovered to be pregnant, is driven out of the house by her unforgiving mother. Ephraim, the youngest child, is compelled to study the catechism and is forbidden, because of his poor health, to play like other children. He spends his days in a grim preparation for the next world.

That this woman is assuming the role of Jehovah is suggested in the description of her household. Those subject to her authority are not permitted to rebel; if they do so, they are banished, as though from the house of God. Deborah seems almost to exist without sleeping; "oftentimes her senses seemed to gain in alertness as the day wore on, and many a night she was up and at work long after all the other members of her family were in bed. There came at such times to Deborah Thayer a certain peace and triumphant security, when all the other wills over which her own held contested sway were lulled to sleep and she could concentrate all her energies upon her work" (pp. 152-153). She is apparently all-seeing, watching so closely over her son Ephraim that he does not dare steal even a forbidden plum from the mince-pie lest he hear

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"What are you doing, Ephraim?" in a voice "like one from the Old Testament" (p. 217). The mother's sharp eye for mischief is here made more frightening for the child. "A vague and preposterous boyish fancy actually passed through his bewildered boyish brain that the little, tightly twisted knob of hair on the back of a feminine head might have some strange visual power of its own" (p. 218). This is meant as the fancy of a morbid youth whose childhood has been too much steeped in Scripture and catechism to be quite normal; he fears his mother as he might fear the watchful eye of God. Here is another brush stroke in the painting of Deborah in the role of the Almighty.

But playing God is dangerous for a human being. Deborah punishes her son for disobedience by whipping him--against the advice of the doctor--and Ephraim drops dead. Unknown to his mother, he has really died of overexertion after having crept out to go coasting on the previous night, subsequently adding to his iniquities by stealing a piece of mince-pie. It is probable that his life was prolonged by his strict upbringing, but few readers would fail to sympathize with the one good time that Ephraim contrived to enjoy before his death. Deborah firmly believes that she is responsible for his death, and she tries to justify her act with a Scriptural parallel: "I couldn't let him go astray too . . . I couldn't! . . . I would--have lain him upon--the altar, as Abraham laid Isaac!" (p. 240). She sees his death as a sacrifice to the stern God of

Mosaic law who demands unquestioning obedience, not as the result of her own rigid discipline that permits no lax behavior even in a little boy. Isolated in religious hubris, Deborah is not quite human, yet human enough to be stricken by the terrible results of trying to assume the role of God. She cannot cope with maternal love but only with duty; when she finds out that she was not necessarily responsible for the tragedy, she collapses altogether under this second shock and dies. The possibility of accident under her supposedly all-governing rule, and the pressure of emotions consistently denied by her grim and obstinate spirit, are matters that remind Deborah Thayer too strongly that she is but mortal. Rather than face them, she chooses death. She is an admirably conceived character, perhaps the strongest of all Freeman protagonists; there is something almost epic in her stature and in her single-minded implacability. And there is something terrible in her denial of human affection as a necessary part of existence. It is this denial that results not only in her death but in much of the suffering in Pembroke; Deborah Thayer's negation of love has unhappy effects upon her children and also those outside her household.

To achieve true integrity of self, according to Mary Wilkins Freeman, one must simultaneously maintain a degree of independence and a sense of responsibility toward other people. Such responsibility, as she sees it, involves recognizing others as individuals with whom one may share

part of oneself, but not all. It is unhealthy to pamper other people through a conviction that unselfishness is virtuous, or to go to the opposite extreme and shut them away from one altogether. The images of lifelessness that Mrs. Freeman suggests underline the spiritual sickness of both attitudes. Dolls and vampires symbolize the relationships that drain vigor and dehumanize the personality. Icy, stony or frozen structures and surfaces point to an impervious wall about the individual. Such motifs, implicit or explicit, emphasize the unhappy results of misused and distorted affection.

That isolation can be harmful to the soul is a theme that Mrs. Freeman of course shares with Hawthorne. I have already referred to the Hawthornian implications of Barney Thayer's deformed back. But there are certain essential differences in the moral outlook of these two writers. For Hawthorne, the cardinal sin seems to be the selfishness that excludes all consideration for others. Such a selfishness can destroy other people. Some of his characters treat their associates as objects of impersonal study, experimenting with them; one may think of Rappaccini or Roger Chillingworth. Others destroy their loved ones through neglect, as in "The Man of Adamant." The proud and isolated protagonists in the fiction of Mary Wilkins Freeman seem to fit more closely into this latter category. Mrs. Freeman goes farther than Hawthorne, however, in demonstrating that unselfishness can be detrimental to

the self if no room is permitted for some expression of individuality. To isolate oneself from others is wrong in her eyes, but to reserve nothing for one's own psychic sustenance is equally unwise. In order to preserve the integrity of the individual, Mary Wilkins Freeman sees it as necessary to maintain a balance between love for others and love for oneself.

NOTES

Epigraphs: 1. From "Coronation," in *The Copy Cat and Other Stories* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1914), p. 200. 2. "Egotism, or the Bosom Serpent," *Selected Tales and Sketches*, introd. H. H. Waggoner (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1950), p. 201.

[1] Brown, p. 299.

[2] Included in *The Winning Lady and Others* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1909).

[3] Included in *The Copy Cat*.

[4] Hilfer, p. 49.

[5] *Pembroke: A Novel* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1894). All further citations to *Pembroke* will be to this text.

[6] Introduction to Westbrook's edition of *Pembroke* (New Haven: College and University Press, 1971), p. 13.

[7] Foster, p. 22.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 128.

[9] Introduction, Westbrook's edition of *Pembroke*, pp. 16, 20.

CHAPTER V

> In novels [love is] treated, not only as if it were the chief interest of life, but the sole interest of the lives of two ridiculous young persons.
>
> -- William Dean Howells

As a background to her theme of individual heroism, Mary Wilkins Freeman often introduces one or more sentimental plot patterns. These plots are subtly altered in such a way that the reader who anticipates a stock love story will be compelled to look at the situation in a different perspective. The expected romantic interest is set aside so that attention is focused upon the unromantic protagonists and their concerns. By this technique, Mrs. Freeman quietly ridicules some of the conventions of popular literature and at the same time maintains her defense of the courageous individual whose integrity is more important than his love life. In these next three chapters I shall be discussing this technique, which is found in much of Mrs. Freeman's best fiction and which has been overlooked or misunderstood by her critics.

One device sometimes used by Mrs. Freeman is that of the displaced love plot. It occurs in the form of an apparently irrelevant story line, a superficial

romance between an almost faceless pair of lovers whose only function within the story seems to be to provide a sop to the sentimental reader. Such romantic sub-plots have been responsible for a great deal of the criticism directed toward the author because of her so-called lapses into sentimentality. A closer look at her boy-and-girl formula reveals, however, that she is making deliberate use of it in order to strengthen the effect of her central protagonist and central theme. The conventional romantic structure is given ironic twists that distort it; the reader is consequently jolted out of any expectation of a nice love story. Indeed, the "nice love story" may be shown in the context of the tale to be vicious and destructive because some of the characters believe so implicitly in it. Mrs. Freeman not only minimizes the standard boy-meets-girl plot but also expresses her disapproval of the society that inspires--and enjoys--this literary pap. Through her displacement, she implies that people too often concentrate on sentimental relationships that are not nearly as important as other human concerns. As I have pointed out earlier, she recognizes the necessity for affection as a means of maintaining true integrity of self. It is the unrealistic and near-maudlin attitude toward love that she deplores.

A good example of the love interest being displaced occurs in "A Tardy Thanksgiving," in which the religious rebellion of Jane Muzzy is juxtaposed with the broken romance of her niece Lizzie. Lizzie is indicated as a

forlorn heroine, but the sketch the author makes of her is scarcely flattering. "She had delicate features, and would have been pretty if it had not been for a pitiful droop at the corners of her mouth, the dullness of her eyes, and the dark rings under them" (p. 52). Such a description is not quite in the tradition of the forsaken maiden who goes into a languid but graceful decline; the emphasis is rather on Lizzie's listlessness and her "expression of misery too helpless and settled to be augmented" (p. 52). Lizzie is more a candidate for Miss Lydia E. Pinkham's Tonic than a romantic martyr to hopeless affection. She sees herself, however, in the latter role. "My heart ought to be broken, and it is," she sighs; one may note the order of her statements. Only when her suitor returns is she infused with any vitality, and her delight is excessive under the circumstances. The "happy trembling whisper that seemed almost ready to break out into a scream of joy" and the "tears of pure delight" (p. 56) are evoked not because the fickle George has proposed at last, but because he has come to take Lizzie to his parents' home for Thanksgiving dinner. This anticlimax undercuts the girl's dramatic posturings. In addition, her eager acquiescence makes her too easy a conquest, as Foster has pointed out;[1] she is too willing to run back to George as soon as he condescends to notice her again. Lizzie is made a caricature of the sentimental heroine who languishes in an excess of emotion; she is not an object of sympathy but a silly creature who is

almost enjoying her suffering.

In contrast to Lizzie, whose life has absolutely no meaning unless she has a lover, appears her aunt Jane--the real heroine of the story. Although she has endured a far greater loss than has her niece, Jane is anything but passive; her strong-minded defiance is underlined by the presence of Lizzie, a figure so completely without volition. Jane is not willing to be the puppet of Providence. Her apparent punishment at the end is actually a kind of triumph, for she is convinced that she has forced God to pay some personal attention to her. Lizzie, who yields herself wholly to the whims of George, provides an invidious counterpoint throughout the story. I do not agree with Foster's reading of this juxtaposition as a parallel situation. He states that "surely one is intended to accept this interweaving of the sub- and main plots and its humorous and feminomorphic vision of the relation between Jehovah and his subjects. Ultimate capitulation is expected."[2] His view is that both women have rightly given in to the superior male principle, although he does concede that Lizzie gave in too easily. In fact, the two women act very differently; Lizzie accepts her lover's attitude without question, but Jane defies the Almighty and refuses to make her peace with him until some concession is made toward her as an individual. Her feeling of having been abandoned by God and her consequent rebellion are given more force because of the presence of her niece's

trivial romance.

"A Modern Dragon" also places the romantic plot in an ironic perspective. Beginning as it does with the pretty Almira catching the admiration of David in church, it leads the reader to assume that Almira is to be the heroine. There is a budding romance here, but it is Almira's mother who is the author of it--an author with a flair for the sentimental cliché. Mrs. King sends the girl to meeting in a pretty silk gown, and is optimistic when this innocent bait attracts David. "He's a good, stiddy young man . . . an' there's a good deal of money there" (p. 66). Although taking the practical view, Mrs. King is not primarily after money. Her simple hope is that hero will marry heroine and that both will live happily ever after. Almira throws herself into the role with no reservations: "This was her first lover, and she had not known any better than to begin loving him vehemently," Mrs. Freeman says dryly (p. 70). Such an attitude is as disastrous for Almira as it was for Lizzie; when David yields to his mother's disapproval and ceases to call, the girl is overwhelmingly disappointed. Mrs. Freeman gives the story a further twist by making the mother share in the suffering. Almira "altered in her looks; her simple, smiling face grew thin and pitiful. Her mother studied it like a chapter in which her own future sorrows were written out" (p. 71). Mrs. King has identified herself too closely with the romantic story she has attempted to create; hoping to read only a pretty

love tale in her daughter's countenance, she is now fearful that the tale will have a sad ending. Here is the point at which the reader's point of view should diverge from that of Mrs. King, for it becomes obvious that the attempt to force romance upon circumstances can have unhappy results.

Ultimately--and ironically--it is Mrs. King who is most affected by the disrupted love affair. Almira is left to fade more or less into the background. Mrs. King "suffered far more than her daughter; she watched for David's coming with a stronger anxiety" (p. 71). Herein lies the real tragedy of the story--the mother's assumption of the role of suffering heroine as she once more effaces herself for her daughter's sake. She humbles herself by pleading with David's implacable mother. She goes into a physical decline, and it is she who dies of heartbreak at the end of the story. Even on her deathbed she tries to read the happy ending she so desperately sought. "I'd like to see you look happy and smilin' agin, deary, the way you used to," she pleads, urging the couple to join hands (p. 77). But the romantic love tale Mrs. King tried to invent is just not working out according to the rules. An idyllic resolution cannot be forced. Mrs. King's summoning of David is the emotional equivalent of shotgun-wedding pressure; he stands there "beside himself with pity and shame." As for Almira, the story closes with the sounds of her weeping vow that she will never love David

as much as she loved her mother. For this dubious reconciliation of the lovers, the real heroine has given up self-respect, integrity, and finally her life. The contrast between Mrs. King's sentimental expectations and the real situation shows that she paid too much for the romance she desired. In "A Modern Dragon" the love-plot is displaced by being shown as a sinister and destructive element. It could be read side by side with Howells's Rise of Silas Lapham as another fictional illustration of the way that sentimentality can ruin human lives.

In certain Freeman stories, the rebellious and independent heroine appears to come between two lovers. The expectations of the reader may follow the pattern outlined by Northrop Frye in his study of the structure of comedy: that is, that the blocking member or members of the older generation must finally yield in order that the lovers may be united.[3] When the elderly woman protagonist in a Freeman tale exhibits traits that seem at first unreasonably rigid, sympathy may be evoked for the young people who are apparently kept apart by her attitude. Yet Mrs. Freeman often works to overcome this response in order to keep the emphasis upon the problems of her real heroine. She may demonstrate that the protagonist is justified to some extent in her obstinacy and that her defiance is preferable to the meek passiveness of the ingenue. The thwarted love affair may be treated not as a vital part of the story but rather as an unfortunate by-product of the

heroine's independent stand. Finally, Mrs. Freeman may show that there are more reasons than one to account for the interrupted romance, and that the protagonist is not necessarily the blocking element.

I have already discussed Esther Gay of "An Independent Thinker," who shows heroic endurance in refusing to accede to conventional piety and who prefers to worship God through her Sunday knitting. Her unconventional outlook has adverse effects upon the courtship of her granddaughter, for the suitor's mother disapproves of Sabbath-breakers. Mrs. Freeman underplays the broken romance as only one of several results of Esther's free-thinking. Nevertheless she presents Hatty as a sympathetic character rather than as a self-indulgent creature such as Lizzie. Hatty is much like her grandmother: "There was an unflinching strength in that little, meagre body" (p. 305). In order to keep Esther as a sympathetic person, Mrs. Freeman modifies the tragic implications of the separation. The suitor's mother is the true blocking individual, and Henry himself is too obedient to his mother; he does not seem to be able to assert himself. Perhaps the author is suggesting his weakness through her omission of Henry as a character with a speaking part. Hatty is primarily concerned with her love affair; if she does not dramatize herself sentimentally, she nevertheless is too preoccupied with losing Henry to consider whether she might be happy with him if his mother continued to dominate him. Esther's

comment, "You can git somebody else jest as good as he is," may have some point, but Hatty is too upset to listen. She cannot understand her grandmother's point of view, whether it relates to suitors or to knitting on Sundays. Mrs. Freeman demonstrates here that romantic love can make certain people blind to the motives and needs of others.

Despite a reasonably adequate defense of her heroine, Mrs. Freeman must have decided that heroic little Hatty was suffering too much. She has Esther act as a deus ex machina within the story, manipulating events in order to effect the reconciliation of the lovers. At the same time, she is able to adjust her own life so that it is more in accordance with village standards of piety, although it does not cease to follow her individual style of doing what she thinks is right. In "A Modern Dragon" the heroine fell victim to her attempts to create a romantic situation; in "An Independent Thinker" the author and the heroine coincide in their desire to promote a happy ending. Irony gives way to sentiment. Granted, Esther is made to resolve the problem in a manner suited to her character. She takes the feeble Lavinia Dodge into her home; she will therefore be too busy with the invalid to do any knitting on Sunday, but she will also have a good excuse not to go to meeting, since she cannot leave Lavinia alone. Her contrivances (and Mrs. Freeman's) have a rather strong smell of the lamp about them.

Similarly, in "A Village Singer," there is some

danger at first that the reader's sympathies will lie with the young woman Alma rather than with Candace, the resentful old heroine. The story begins with Alma singing in the church choir, only to be suddenly interrupted by the voice of the supplanted lead soprano. Wilson, who is Alma's betrothed and Candace's nephew (a further complication), regards her from the congregation with pity. Having set up the framework for a love story, the author then proceeds to set it aside in favor of the problems of the real heroine. As she did in "A Tardy Thanksgiving," she infuses the old woman with vitality and reveals the ingenue as limp and passive. Mrs. Freeman might have evoked compassion for the younger singer by having Candace vent her spite directly upon the rival. In fact, Candace's interruption of the service with her own private, rebellious hymns of non-worship is directed not so much against Alma personally as against the church members who, in effect, told her she was no longer wanted. The worst she says of Alma is that she "flats" when she sings--a criticism professional rather than personal. Her comment that Alma would not make Wilson much of a wife because she is so soft-spoken and meek does not seem particularly harsh, since it is true; Alma is too colorless to make much impression upon the reader. Throughout the story Candace dominates; her interruption of Alma's solo typifies the way in which the voice of the apparent heroine is consistently drowned out by the vigorous notes of the real one.

As the author demonstrates, Candace's reaction is not altogether unjustified; she has been summarily dismissed for the sake of a replacement who is younger but not necessarily a better singer. If her attitude appears to thwart the love affair of Alma and Wilson, it does not really do so. It is true that Candace quarrels with Wilson over the hymn-singing episode and threatens to change her will. Wilson is, however, indifferent to the prospects of inheriting money from his aunt; as the author affirms, he is not counting on anything but his own labor as a means of ensuring his future. His failure to be disturbed by the threat undercuts its impact; the opportunity to make the lovers into victims of Candace's wrath is avoided. At the end, when Candace is driven by her conscience to retract her harsh words and to promise the couple her house and possessions, the conventional framework is that of the old woman repenting on her deathbed of her cruelty to the lovers. But this relenting is almost an afterthought. The real cruelty of Candace has been toward herself, not toward Alma and Wilson; she has been destroyed by her own stern conscience. The focus remains upon her even when she asks her rival to sing--a request apparently arising out of her new-found humility. But Alma's sweet, quavering voice does not restore her to the centre of the stage, for the dying Candace reminds her that she still sings flat.

The presence of the displaced love interest as a deliberate device has been virtually overlooked by Freeman

critics. The only hint of any recognition of this technique is found in an anonymous review of A New England Nun, which review otherwise misconstrues the tone of the collection altogether. "The book is charged with tender sentiment, yet once only . . . at the close of the moving story Christmas Jenny, does the author introduce anything which may be likened to an artistic use of sentiment. In this story the figures of the girl and her lover make the kind of foil which we are used to in German sentimental literature."[4] Presumably the reviewer sees the lovers as a contrast to the solitary "love-cracked" Jenny, alone in her wilderness cottage. Taken by itself, this scene may seem poignant, pointing up the loneliness of the woman who has no lover. Taken in conjunction with the rest of the story, however, it suggests quite a different mood. The lovers are certainly not sentimentally depicted when they first appear: the girl chatters aimlessly, proud and embarrassed at appearing in public with her suitor, and he in turn is so enraptured by her presence that he does not even know what she is saying. The girl is talking about Christmas Jenny; she seems wholly indifferent to the woman's threatened expulsion from her home, seeing her only as a convenient topic of conversation. In the context of the story, this scene could be intended to illustrate the unwitting selfishness of lovers who are aware only of each other. At the end, however, the couple is depicted looking up toward Jenny's light, which dominates the scene as it

shines down upon the village. Jenny's light--or her serene existence--is no longer in imminent danger of being extinguished. The perspective shifts to two small figures who are gazing upward at the radiance of a woman who may lack a sweetheart but who nevertheless has a great capacity for love.

It is interesting to compare Mrs. Freeman's juxtaposition of central protagonist and peripheral lovers with that of James Fenimore Cooper. Like Mrs. Freeman in her best fiction, Cooper sometimes concentrated upon characters and themes that had little to do with the conventional love interest. In his Virgin Land, Henry Nash Smith discusses the problem Cooper experienced in developing his unromantic hero, Natty Bumppo, while at the same time feeling the need to accede to the demands of popular fiction by including a romantic plot. Smith points out that Cooper even attempted to introduce a suitable mate for Natty in Mabel Dunham of The Pathfinder. Mabel was conceived as a girl of less refinement than most genteel Cooper heroines and therefore more appropriate as a wife for the socially inferior Natty.[5] The attempt proved a failure, as Mabel remained still much too refined to marry a backwoodsman. By such contrivances, Cooper shows himself to have been greatly influenced by the sentimental fictional conventions that Mary Wilkins Freeman, in her short stories at least, manages to override. Cooper doggedly includes token genteel lovers in his Leatherstocking tales, and even tries to raise

Leatherstocking himself to the level of traditional hero, "the man who played the male lead in the courtship."[6] Mrs. Freeman, on the other hand, does not usually shape her early stories around the necessary love interest of her heroine. (One exception--a notable failure--is "In Butterfly Time," included in A Humble Romance and one of the very few inferior tales in this volume. It is a sentimental tale of two old lovers who are eventually reunited after forty years' separation.) She might, like Cooper, have given in to convention and automatically included a pair of lovers in each story without integrating them, thus detracting from the emphasis placed upon the older, unromantic heroine. By pointing the romantic plot in such a way that it actually underlines her theme of the individual confronting a conformist society, she is using this fictional mode instead of allowing it to use her.

Closely related to the displaced love affair is another device that I might call the ironic fairy tale. In a few stories, Mrs. Freeman sets the romance of the protagonist in the context of a fairy story, and then--with either explicit or implicit references to the genre--she proceeds to demolish the romantic illusion and substitute the comic or tragic reality of the situation.

For example, "A Humble Romance" begins as a Cinderella story in that Sally resembles the drab little kitchen slavey of the original tale. Like her prototype,

she is an orphan compelled to work hard for her living and harshly treated by the household. She is to achieve a transformation and is to be rescued from her dismal surroundings by a lover. But the story is not developed in the conventional fashion. Sally lacks the beauty of the heroine who needed only to wash the cinders from her face and put on a fine ball gown; in her pinched, work-reddened appearance, she may have provided a shock for the reader. Further, she has no fairy godmother to help her; she pays for her bridal outfit out of her own meagre savings. And the rescuer who takes her from her kitchen is no prince with a kingdom, but a tin-pedlar with a dubious past who is compelled to desert her for a time. Sally is not a romantic Cinderella who has everything done for her; her real beauty lies in her character, not her appearance, and her eventual triumph over her surroundings results not from magic wands or handsome princes, but from her own self-reliance. By suggesting and then setting aside the fairy-tale formula, Mrs. Freeman emphasizes that Sally is an individual with admirable courage, not a passive princess-to-be waiting to be rescued. Left alone, she carries on the tin-cart business by herself, and survives.

Fidelia Almy of "A Patient Waiter" is described explicitly in the fairy-tale context. "This poor, nodding, enchanted princess was saving her gay attire till the prince returned and the enchantment ceased, and she was beautiful

again" (p. 408). The rituals traditional for such a heroine during her period of probation or exile are turned into prosaic everyday tasks, such as the faithful tidying of the parlor and the daily trips to the post office for a letter that has been delayed for forty years. In her mind they are carried out for the sake of the lover who must one day write to her, or even come back, but in reality they are meaningless. Fidelia drinks tonics to restore her strength and health: not magic potions, but doses of catnip tea. She even bathes her face daily in morning dew, as though she were frequenting the fountain of youth. "It works better on me than it does on you, don't it?" her niece Lily innocently comments. The fairy-story motif is relentlessly set aside in favor of the reality; Fidelia is old, quivering, not quite straight in her mind. The presence of Lily, who grows to maturity as the story progresses, further emphasizes the difference between reality and dream. Once she is older, Lily understands the tragic waste of her aunt's life, and no longer believes in the romantic tale with the happy ending. But Fidelia never grows up enough to realize that her prince will not come back; to the end she remains the child who trusts in the fairy story and in the ultimate reward of the faithful princess. Lily--and the reader--can see the terrible difference between truth and illusion, but Fidelia's vision is permanently colored by her dreams. She is wholly the victim of romance, and all the strength and endurance she

possesses is directed toward a futile end. "A Patient Waiter" is a tragic story, not because the handsome Mr. Lennox failed to return, but because Fidelia's devotion made her a captive in a kind of enchantment from which she could not escape. The fairy-tale framework effectively points up the real grimness of the story.

"Cinnamon Roses" is another interesting fairy-story variant. Elsie, in the role of the Ugly Sister, has made the dead Lucina a beautiful princess whom she must still protect. It is as though Lucina is the Sleeping Beauty, complete with the thorny barrier of roses. What Elsie fails to realize is that these roses have made a barricade not about her sleeping sister, but about Elsie herself, cutting her off from the realization that she, too, is an individual worthy of affection. Elsie cannot imagine having a love affair; only beautiful heroines have suitors. In death, as in life, Lucina's presence drains the life from her sister; as I have already mentioned, the image shifts from sleeping beauty to vampire.

William's role seems at first to be that of the rescuing prince who will slash through the barricade of thorns and awaken the real sleeping princess. Yet William is a rather ineffectual prince; Elsie even contrives to steal his "sword" before he can cut down the hedge of roses. He does not even exact marriage as the price of his rescue. "I didn't reely s'pose you'd be willin' to marry me, you treated me so indiff'rent in Luciny's day; but I didn't

pay no attention to that. I wanted you to keep on livin' here" (p. 178). And Elsie is no princess; she is not even an ugly duckling with attractive potential, but a scrawny little woman whose face is red from weeping over the loss of her home. She is shrilly vindictive toward William, accusing him of slighting Lucina's memory. Her real fineness lies in her loyalty and devotion, even if these qualities are misdirected. As a final unromantic touch, it is Elsie who ultimately does the proposing, William having at first assumed that it is no use to ask her to marry him. The happy ending that might be taken for granted, since their marriage is the final event in the story, is qualified by these touches that deflate the fairy-tale pattern. Elsie and William will have no idyllic existence, for Elsie's obsession with her sister has not yet been dispelled. William may rescue her through his devotion--and he may not. As with Fidelia, Mrs. Freeman demonstrates that a belief in fairy-story plots can be dangerous in real life.

I might mention other examples in which the story is not based primarily on a fairy tale, but in which certain elements of the genre exist. For instance, in "Louisa," the mother considers her daughter's obstinacy about refusing Jonathan like "a princess refusing the fairy prince and spoiling the story" (p. 395). The contrast between a prince and the awkward Jonathan, who stolidly proffers gifts of honey and other farm produce in lieu of

jewels or similar courtship tokens, makes Mrs. Britton's sentimental imaginings ridiculous. It underlines the difference between Louisa's realistic attitude and her mother's idea that the girl must eventually fall in love with Jonathan just because he is her suitor.

As with her other displacements of the love interest, Mary Wilkins Freeman presents the ironic fairy tale in order to demonstrate that the romantic formula simply does not work in real life. She may introduce characters who themselves believe in the happily-ever-after myth and who act accordingly. Some of these characters may learn their folly; others may never be free of their illusions. Mrs. Freeman undercuts the traditional development of the love interest not as an irrelevant digression but as a means of furthering her oblique attack upon both sentimental writing and sentimental thinking.

NOTES

Epigraph: The Rise of Silas Lapham, ed. Edwin H. Cady (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. 163.

[1] Foster, p. 81.

[2] Ibid.

[3] "The Mythos of Spring: Comedy," Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (1957; New York: Atheneum, 1968), pp. 163-186.

[4] "New England in the Short Story," Atlantic Monthly, 67 (June 1891), 847.

[5] Virgin Land: The American West in Symbol and Myth (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), pp. 64 ff.

[6] Ibid., p. 65.

CHAPTER VI

> Before the twentieth century, only Mark Twain among all our novelists, popular or serious, seems to have mocked outright the blue-eyed Protestant Virgin, who pre-empted in our fiction the position real women might have filled.
>
> --Leslie A. Fiedler

Mary Wilkins Freeman's alteration of the sentimental convention extends to her presentation of characters as well as situations. Heroines and heroes are both placed in a perspective that has little to do with established sex roles. In this chapter I am dealing with the heroines found in the best fiction of Mrs. Freeman--figures who deviate considerably from the traditionally frail and passive feminine ideal of the sentimental-genteel era.

In my discussion of the displaced love plot, I have pointed out that the emphasis is kept upon the elderly and unromantic woman as the true heroine, and that the pretty ingenue, the conventional central female figure, is made silly and weak rather than attractive. It is hard to ascertain whether or not Mrs. Freeman was the first to use an old woman as heroine. Hepzibah Pyncheon in Hawthorne's House of the Seven Gables is one of the chief

protagonists of the novel, but she is not necessarily more of a heroine than is the nubile Phoebe. Elderly women appear in the stories of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Rose Terry Cooke, but these figures are more often local color sketches than protagonists of serious fiction. Mary Wilkins Freeman appears to be the first to use this innovation of an old heroine consistently; almost all of her best female characters are past middle age.

The few exceptions to this general rule should be noted. Mrs. Freeman inverts the tradition of the sentimental heroine not only by introducing an old woman but also by occasionally setting forth a young girl who differs from conventional standards. In 1886 she wrote to Mary Louise Booth that her newest heroine was "a young girl, whom I am trying very hard not to make horrid";[1] and, later in the same year, "I am going to send a story to you. I suppose it is so tragic, with the heroine frozen stiff, that nobody will want it."[2] The implication here is that she was experimenting with a younger heroine and that she was finding it difficult to create one who was not horrid or frozen stiff--terms that could well be applied to the sentimental female protagonist so popular in contemporary fiction. Such a figure was often more of a puppet responding only to the vibration of emotional strings than a character who possessed any individuality or volition.

A few of her early heroines show very little

deviation from the convention, at least in appearance. Lois of "Robins and Hammers" and Hannah of "Calla-Lilies and Hannah" follow the pattern that the English Bookman apparently saw as typical of Freeman women: "She draws many pictures of the American girl--not the rather attenuated smart person which we may meet fresh any month in Mr. Howells' pages--not the brilliant omnipotent belle of fashionable life, but the fair, delicate, nervous, independent flower of New England, the girl who 'teaches school,' works at dressmaking, or on the farm, whose slender form and pink and white complexion cover a resolute will and sensitive nerves."[3] It is interesting that the Bookman reviewer failed to notice other heroines in the same story collections who were anything but fair, delicate and nervous.

For example, what Mrs. Freeman does with some of her young heroines is to reverse what Leslie Fiedler calls the "stereotyped data" of fair hair, fine white skin, blue eyes, and delicate frame that constitute the Pure Maiden.[4] Herbert Ross Brown quotes Mrs. Wood's Ferdinand and Elmira to illustrate the conventional ideal of beauty: "Her hair was a light auburn; it was curled over a neck, whose extreme whiteness, fine polish, and elegant form, might have vied with the finest statuary; and her mild blue eyes, shone with a soft radiance, the harbingers of virtue, truth, and innocence."[5] With such expectations in mind, it must have been something of a shock for Mrs. Freeman's readers to

encounter a heroine such as Eunice Fairweather of "A Moral Exigency" (A Humble Romance): "She was a tall, heavily-built girl, with large, well-formed feet and hands. She had a full face, and a thick, colorless skin. Her features were coarse, but their combination affected one pleasantly. It was a stanch, honest face, with a suggestion of obstinacy in it" (p. 221). How might such readers react to two other heroines who appear in the same volume--Inez Morse, who is plain, awkward, and round-shouldered, with a "thick, dull-colored complexion," and Delia Caldwell of "A Conquest of Humility," tall and full-figured, with strong features and a tendency to tramp heavily? Mrs. Freeman seems to be constructing, almost feature by feature, her own particular type--or stereotype--of young woman, a construct that is the antithesis of the accepted ideal. Now it is possible for a plain heroine to emerge later as attractive enough to win the hero from the wicked, gorgeous rival; this sort of Ugly Duckling transformation occurs in Jane Eyre and in Maria Cummins's The Lamplighter. Mrs. Freeman's sturdy heroines, however, do not alter in this fashion. Side by side with the old women, these plain young girls stand forth as basically unromantic figures. The drastic change in physical attributes may be intended to signal that the lives of such characters may be far removed from the established "woman's sphere" of the time.

As for the rivals who appear side by side with these unbeautiful heroines, they are structured so as to

thrust the traditional feminine ideal even further out of place. The "other woman" is basically a parody of the conventional heroine. She is not the dark, flirtatious siren who complements the fair and innocent maiden; she is herself the pale, delicate ingenue. Olive Briggs of "A Conquest of Humility" is a flighty, emotional creature who persuades Delia's bridegroom to jilt her at the altar and who later abandons him for a newer flame. She might be a sister to Ada Harris, Eunice Fairweather's friend and rival for the attentions of the vacillating Burr Mason in "A Moral Exigency." Olive is described conventionally: "The girl was pretty, with the prettiness that Delia lacked. Her face was sweet and rosy and laughing. She was fine and small, and moved with a sort of tremulous lightness like a butterfly" (p. 426). Ada is even more the stereotype: "a pretty blonde of average attainments, but with keen wits and strong passions" (p. 228). She has the usual blue eyes and red lips, not to mention the ultra-emotional nature that results in the decline mandatory for the deserted maiden. Her hysterical ravings, as she pleads with Eunice, sound like a parody rather than a serious speech. After several reiterations of "Eunice! how could you?" she indulges in an outburst of clichés: "You do this cruel thing--you, a minister's daughter. You understood from the first how it was. You knew he was mine, that you had no right to him. You knew if you shunned him ever so little, that he would come back to me. . . . You have encouraged

him in being false. You have dragged him down. . . . You will not make him a better wife. You cannot make him a good wife after this. . . . Eunice, O Eunice, give him up to me! It is killing me!" (p. 231). This is the sort of speech that would be more appropriate (with suitable gestures) to a stage melodrama. Given the normally quiet tone of Mrs. Freeman's work, Ada's performance seems a burlesque of the emotional scenes typical of sentimental literature. Ada persists in reacting according to the traditions of popular fiction, dramatizing her forlorn condition; one may be reminded again of Lizzie in "A Tardy Thanksgiving." Eunice's dry, common-sense retort, "You ask me why I do this and that, but don't you think he had anything to do with it himself?" (p. 231) cuts across this emotional outburst, but her realistic attitude is soon overcome by the pressures of sentimental guilt feelings. Stricken with remorse, she reacts much as though she were in fact a scheming siren who had repented: "She was very pale, and there was a strange look, almost of horror, on her face. . . . There was the little glass she had looked in before she had stolen another woman's dearest wealth away from her, the chair she had sat in, the bed she had lain in" (p. 232). In contemplating her so-called lost innocence, Eunice is too readily accepting the label of seductive "other woman" attributed to her by the hysterical Ada. It is Ada who is in fact the true villainess, her weeping passivity made a vicious weapon of emotional

blackmail. A treatment such as this presents the sentimental heroine in a very ugly light.

Mrs. Freeman violates the convention of the heroine not only through her old women and her plain young girls but also through her female characters who do not follow the established codes of "feminine" behavior, such as passivity, modesty, dependence, and self-sacrifice. By showing these roles as unrealistic, and by presenting ulterior motives on the part of those who try to force conformity upon the heroines, the author demonstrates the shallowness of so-called ideal womanly attitudes.

The excessive modesty of the young girl--Howells's Young Person whose cheek must be kept innocent of a blush--is illustrated in The Rise of Silas Lapham. Irene is overcome with confusion because her father is showing a young man the girls' bedroom, the room no more than a framework of scaffolding.[6] In contrast, the Freeman heroine may speak in a very forthright manner, even going so far as to mention the possibility of having children. Motherhood may have been a blessed institution, but the Young Person did not anticipate it aloud, especially in mixed company. Even married women in popular fiction resorted to the sort of circumlocution that is found in Our Mutual Friend. Bella, the heroine, finds it necessary to make a verbal ocean voyage before she can tell her husband that she is pregnant: "As he bent his face to hers, she raised hers to meet it, and laid her

little right hand on his eyes, and kept it there. 'Do you remember, John, on the day we were married, Pa's speaking of the ships that might be sailing towards us from the unknown seas? . . . I think--among them--there is a ship upon the ocean--bringing--to you and me--a little baby, John.'"[7]

Yet Inez Morse, without the hint of a blush, refers to the possibility of having children. "Mrs. Linfield ain't able to work, and Willy's got to look out for her. Then I've got you. And there might be more still to do for in the course of two or three years; nobody knows" (p. 102). So matter of fact is she that one nearly misses the comment in passing.

Eunice Fairweather is more outspoken in her rejection of the emotional ammunition that her father is using as he tries to persuade her to accept her middle-aged suitor. He piles cliché upon cliché: "Mr. Wilson is a good man; he would make you a worthy husband, and he needs a wife sadly. Think what a wide field of action would be before you with those four little motherless children to love and care for! You would have a wonderful opportunity to do good" (p. 224). Were Eunice the conventional heroine, she would be attracted by this challenge; as Brown points out, matrimony "was often welcomed by sentimental heroines as a means of extending the scope of their humanitarian activities."[8] But even if Eunice is a minister's daughter, she is not interested in taking on

additional responsibilities and assuming the role of a self-sacrificial heroine. When her father, with a regrettable lack of tact, adds the threat of her spinsterhood to his appeal, her retort is immediate and to the point:

> "There would be six hundred a year and a leaky parsonage for a man and a woman and four children, and--nobody knows how many more." She was almost coarse in her slow indignation, and did not blush at it.
> "The Lord would provide for his servants."
> "I don't know whether he would or not. I don't think he would be under any obligation to if his servant deliberately encumbered himself with more of a family than he had brains to support."

(p. 225)

This blunt rejoinder may have shocked Mrs. Freeman's readers, but it has the effect of slashing through the sentimental illusion that Eunice's father is trying to share with her. The author further reinforces the reality of the circumstances by her comment upon the suitor. This widower is "not thirsting for love and communion with a kindred spirit now, but for a good, capable woman who would take care of his four clamorous children without a salary" (p. 226). Here is a man who found that the romantic formula was false, but who does not hesitate to use it in looking for a second wife; he asks Eunice's father for her hand, assuming the part of an eager lover. Mrs. Freeman points out that he is confident of Eunice's acceptance, since she has probably not had many offers. A girl who reacted conventionally to his proposal, with tremulous blushes and willingness to fulfil her role of

domestic angel, would have fallen into a very nasty trap. Eunice is beset by a variety of social pressures--threats of a lonely spinsterhood, appeals to her sense of filial duty, promises of social status as the wife of a clergyman, opportunities to do good (to four noisy brats), and, presumably, the blessing of God as the frosting on the cake. It is her immodesty of outlook that is her salvation.

Other Freeman heroines also exhibit "unwomanly" behavior. I have already discussed Mrs. King of "A Modern Dragon," whose social ostracism stems in part from her unladylike garb. "She was an odd figure, short and stout, with a masculine width of shoulders. Her calico dress cleared her thick ankles, her black hair was cut short, and she wore a man's straw hat" (p. 63). Long hair and floor-length garments, symbols of female respectability, are scarcely suitable for heavy farm work; Mrs. King's dress is evidence not so much of eccentricity as practicality. In contrast, the author presents another woman, the mother of David Ayres: "David's mother sat by the sitting-room window, fanning herself and reading her Bible. . . . She was a fair, stout woman, in an old-fashioned muslin gown. The ground was white, with a brown vine straggling thickly over it. . . . There were soft curves in her face, which were deceptive" (p. 63). Here is what at first seems to be the epitome of graceful womanly piety, a Whistler's Mother picture that is much more attractive than the sketch of the heavy, almost mannish Mrs. King stumping about in

her farmyard. But Mrs. Freeman is suggesting that behind this façade of feminine sweetness lies something unexpected; if the soft curves are deceptive, the brown vine on her gown is also evocative of a darker element in her personality, for it could be seen as a choking vine that is ready to strangle the love affair of her son and Almira. In contrast, Mrs. King is depicted gathering vegetables from her garden; she moves in a setting of living green things, not dead vines. As the story develops, it becomes obvious that the sweet-looking Mrs. Ayres is vicious and devouring, ready to use her so-called weak heart in order to compel her son to give up his sweetheart. Mrs. King errs at the other extreme--she is too selfless--but she emerges as the more admirable mother of the two, despite her unconventional appearance. Mrs. Freeman demonstrates in this story that a pious and demure womanly exterior does not necessarily signify inner nobility of character.

The heroine of "Louisa" is the despair of the ambitious Mrs. Britton, who is ashamed of having a daughter who is unladylike enough to rake hay and split wood. That the money Louisa earns is desperately needed, and that conventional behavior on her part would soon result in an empty larder, is less important to Mrs. Britton than what people will say. Louisa works to the accompaniment of a constant maternal refrain: "Rakin' hay with the men. . . . I can't stan' it nohow. . . . All the daughter I've got" (p. 398). Louisa defends herself: "What harm is it? Why

can't I rake hay as well as a man? Lots of women do such things. . . . and we need the money" (p. 398). Her earth-stained hands and garments and her brown skin also offend her mother's sensibilities. Mrs. Britton fears that the match she is trying to make will be ruined by her daughter's unfeminine appearance. The pressure exerted upon Louisa is to support her family not through doing man's work but through marrying money. As in "A Moral Exigency," Mrs. Freeman presents her heroine with an opportunity for self-sacrifice (the conventional woman's role) and then reveals the falsity of the apparent situation. It is the desire for prestige that is really motivating Mrs. Britton. In addition, Jonathan is somewhat like the suitor of Eunice Fairweather; he comes with offerings of honey, but his bait of sweetness conceals his true nature. Mrs. Britton finally discovers what lies behind the apparent generosity of her hoped-for son-in-law: "Mis' Mitchell says . . . old Mis' Nye told her . . . if Jonathan had you, he wa'n't goin' to have me an' father hitched on to him; he'd look out for that" (pp. 405-406). With Louisa as with Eunice, the author has presented the sentimental argument as a means of trying to compel the heroine to fit into her accepted "womanly" role, with those using the argument either innocently optimistic as to its worth or else coldly calculating its effect as bait.

Finally, in at least two stories Mrs. Freeman presents heroines who are not utterly and romantically in

love with their suitors--an almost unheard-of departure from tradition. Inez in "A Taste of Honey" is very much aware that she is different from other girls, who flaunt pretty dresses, hair-ribbons, and beaux. When Willy begins to court her, her affection for him is less obvious than is her gratification at having acquired a lover. She is as pleased about Willy as about the new ribbon she finally bought for her hair; both possessions demonstrate that she is now more like her peers. "She had never felt, someway, as if she was in the least one of their kind. She never had the things they had. . . . Three or four of them had lovers. Inez eyed them, and thought how she had one too, and he was coming to-night as well as theirs" (p. 99). This is scarcely a picture of a young girl romantically dreaming about her lover. Eunice Fairweather of "A Moral Exigency" shows much the same attitude toward her suitor, Burr Mason. Like Willy, he is suggested more as a status symbol than an object of passion. "Young men of his kind were unknown quantities heretofore to this steady, homely young woman. . . . Her head was not turned, in the usual acceptation of the term . . . but it was full of Burr Mason" (pp. 228-229). These heroines do experience some affection for their young men, but it is strongly implied that their initial acceptance of this male attention is motivated partly by vanity rather than wholly by the sacred ideal of love at first sight. Mrs. Freeman does not necessarily condemn them for such an attitude, but she

does thereby present the sentimental view of love in a more realistic way.

By her rewriting of the features of the traditional heroine, Mary Wilkins Freeman is presenting her case against the sentimental feminine ideal of her day. Through her reversal of "stereotyped data," she demonstrates that outward appearances can be misleading, and that true fineness of character may exist beneath an "unwomanly" exterior, while unpleasant or destructive personalities may lurk beneath a façade of fragility and decorum. She suggests also that subtle elements of vanity and self-dramatization may color the traditional picture of the young girl in love. Further, she shows that the established "woman's sphere" is too constraining in that role-playing often interferes with common sense. She sets forth the sacred role of womanhood as a baited snare intended to lure girls into unhappy marriages where they will soon lose their sentimental illusions. By pointing out that many characteristics and attitudes expected of women are in fact detrimental to the integrity of her own heroines, she is displacing the accepted idea of femininity. It is possible to see this technique emerging from a quiet feminism on the part of Mrs. Freeman. Although her voice may have gone unnoticed among the more shrill and vociferous demands for female emancipation, it is nevertheless present in her fiction, upholding the right of women to extend their lives beyond accepted boundaries.

It would not be accurate to call the Freeman heroine a feminist, but Mary Wilkins Freeman is herself a feminist in her conception of this literary figure whose sex is irrelevant in her conflict with society.

NOTES

Epigraph: Love and Death in the American Novel, rev. ed. (1966; rpt. New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1969), p. 291.

[1] Letter, Mary Wilkins to Mary Louise Booth, March 17, 1886, University of Virginia.

[2] Letter, Mary Wilkins to Mary Louise Booth, September 8, 1886, University of Virginia.

[3] "Mary E. Wilkins," Bookman [England], 1 (December 1891), 102.

[4] Fiedler, p. 289.

[5] Brown, p. 129; from Ferdinand and Elmira (Baltimore, 1804).

[6] Silas Lapham, p. 43.

[7] Charles Dickens, Our Mutual Friend (New York: New American Library, 1964), p. 754.

[8] Brown, p. 150.

CHAPTER VII

> When Clarissa has become Belinda and Lovelace Rudolph Razzeltine, a third character is added: the blond, moose-jawed, clean-living Hairbreadth Harry, who arrives in the nick of time to snatch Belinda from the revolving saw or the approaching train.
>
> --Leslie A. Fiedler

Side by side with Mrs. Freeman's presentation of her new heroine as a vehicle for undermining the conventional feminine ideal appears a corresponding displacement of the male role. Such a device furthers her arraignment of sentimental literature and also strengthens the subtle feminism present in her depiction of the unromantic female protagonist. Some overlapping of my previous discussion will necessarily occur, but I think that Mrs. Freeman's displaced hero deserves some individual attention.

In sentimental fiction, the male lead is the centre of the feminine universe. Whether he is the strong, noble protector, or the villain whom she must raise, redeem, and reform, the heroine sees in him the fulfilment of herself; without him she is incomplete. Brown quotes a speech reflecting this ideal in Caroline Chesebro's The Children of Light: "I would be the sun of my domestic

world--nothing less. . . . My wife, to use a poet's comparison, should be the moon, whose light reflects from me."[1] Only a few voices in popular novels were courageous enough to disagree. The heroine of Augusta J. Evans Wilson's Beulah proclaims, "Don't talk to me about woman's clinging, dependent nature. . . . I can stand up. . . . I feel humbled when I hear a woman bemoaning the weakness of her sex, instead of showing that she has a soul and mind of her own, inferior to none."[2] In the early fiction of Mrs. Freeman, the respective roles of hero and heroine also point to the independence and freedom of the woman. Blanche Williams states that most Freeman males are "terribly in subjection to the females,"[3] but this implication that the stories contain a great many henpecked men and shrewish women is not really accurate. In order to shift the traditional man-woman relationships in her best fiction, Mrs. Freeman uses literary techniques more subtle than such obviously slanted situations. And some of her apparently henpecked heroes are quite the reverse; one story in A New England Nun, "A Kitchen Colonel," depicts a meek old man who manifests a quiet triumph over his unpleasant and domineering wife.

The alteration of physical appearance is one device that Mrs. Freeman uses in order to underline the divergence of her protagonist from the sentimental norm. But making the true heroine sturdy and plain in contrast to her rival, the delicate and fragile blonde, is not the only

variation of "stereotyped data" found in her work. A more startling innovation is her presentation of suitors with attributes more feminine than masculine. The young man in "A Taste of Honey" is described as fair and inclined to blush easily; he is "a pretty, rather dandified young fellow" (p. 100). The object of contention in "A Moral Exigency," Burr Mason, is "blond and handsome, with a gentle, almost womanish smile on the full red lips, and a dangerous softness in the blue eyes" (p. 227). And Lawrence Thayer of "A Conquest of Humility" also has a "sweet womanish face." It is an odd technique, surely, to give to young male characters the physical features more suited to heroines of popular fiction: here are the blue eyes, the red lips, and the fair hair, supported with an authorial adjective--womanish--that further emphasizes the effeminate nature of these figures. It seems unlikely in the context of the stories that Mrs. Freeman is suggesting homosexual heroes. Rather these suitors resemble the sentimental heroine in their passivity and in their willingness to be "seduced" by an attractive member of the opposite sex and to forget their commitments to another. This latter trait is a characteristic of the flirtatious siren. Like the traditionally frail female, they are also drawn toward stronger personalities, as though in recognition of the presence of the vigor and steadfastness that they lack. Such a treatment of the hero complements the previously discussed depiction of the heroine as sturdy

and independent and sometimes almost mannish in appearance. I suggest that this confusion of sexual attributes is one way in which Mrs. Freeman signals that roles based on the sex of the individual are not as clear-cut in real life as they are in sentimental fiction. She denies the accepted belief that men should behave like Strong Manly Heroes and that women should follow the pattern of the Frail Dependent Heroine.

One traditional formula that illustrates the respective roles of male and female is the rescue of the heroine, either from the villain or from some other great physical peril. In such plots she is dragged from a burning cabin or a canoe about to plunge over a waterfall--situations also popular in the early silent Perils of Pauline. This situation takes for granted the frailness of the woman and the strength of the rescuer, who is necessarily endowed with muscle devoted to a good purpose. In Harold Bell Wright's The Shepherd of the Hills (1907), a popular novel of the time, this ideal is illustrated. Sammy, the heroine, has a city suitor who is well educated and morally upright but who is too weak to protect her against the villain. The latter is eventually subdued by Sammy's true mate, the strong young mountaineer. I cite this to show that the heroine-rescue plot that goes back at least as far as Cooper's Last of the Mohicans persisted in Mrs. Freeman's day and was found even in the early twentieth century.

Mrs. Freeman alters this formula of rescue in several ways. As far as the hero is concerned, she may substitute a psychological rescue for the traditional physical feat of daring. She may depict situations in which the woman is the stronger of the two and in which the hero attains an inner fortitude that he previously lacked. She may have the heroine rescue her lover--again psychologically--or she may make both hero and heroine save themselves independently of one another. All these variations point toward an emphasis on inward courage as exhibited by both men and woman as they face not physical perils but the more subtle pressures of a conformist society.

Jake, the tin-pedlar of "A Humble Romance," sees himself first as the conventional protector of the woman; he decides to rescue this rural Cinderella from her pots and pans. That his own pedlary is also involved with pots and pans, albeit clean and shining ones, is a wry touch. The work-worn Sally is depicted first as a pathetic, spiritless drudge; it is because of her helplessness that Jake is attracted to her. "You're the worst-off-lookin' little cretur I ever set my eyes on," he tells her, adding, "I wanted to take keer on you the minute I set eyes on you" (p. 7). So far, the story appears to be developing just as the title indicates; it is a romance set in everyday surroundings with a pair of lovers who are not beautiful people but who are acceptable as regional types--the hired

girl and the Yankee pedlar. Hero will rescue heroine and take care of her; all seems in accordance with the sentimental pattern. But there is a surprise in store for the reader. Sally is virtually deserted by Jake, although he continues to send money to her. Encountering his first wife, whom he believed dead, he is compelled to go back to her. Despite the shock of separation, Sally emerges as a resolute and independent individual. She takes her husband's parting words to "bear up" far beyond his expectations. The author has prepared the way for Sally's courageous decision to carry on Jake's tin-cart business. Even near the beginning of the story she is given little touches of independence; she refuses to go with Jake unless it is to "go honest"; she risks being stopped by her mistress because she is determined to take her scanty savings; she insists on paying for her wedding-clothes with her own money. Jake is grudgingly admiring of her attitude: "I guess you've got a little will o' your own, arter all . . . an' I'm glad on't. A woman'd orter hev a little will to back her sweetness; it's all too soft and slushy otherways" (p. 15). Just how much will Sally does have is something that Jake does not yet realize; he still believes in the dependent-woman myth. Ironically, it is Jake--the so-called protector--who falls into the hands of his first wife and who is blackmailed into leaving Sally lest his unintentional bigamy be revealed. The hint of this other woman as pretty but shallow and unscrupulous suggests that

Jake was a victim of the sentimental myth and was thereby trapped into a foolish marriage. His choice of Sally shows that he has learned one lesson, but it is not until much later that he discovers her to be strong and self-reliant. He sobs against her cheek, "I didn't know then how you could bear up, little un. Ef you ain't got backbone!" (p. 23).

Mrs. Freeman is not deprecating her heroes because they fail to live up to the established ideal. Jake is not made a coward or a villain because he fails to protect Sally in the conventional sense. In fact, he continues to watch over her indirectly, not so much through the money he sends her as through his parting injunction to "bear up." These words help to sustain Sally throughout their long separation. Jake's strength of character is revealed--and perhaps augmented--by his patient endurance of the long exile from Sally. Had he been a coward, he might have decided to avoid his responsibilities altogether and make sure that neither of his wives found him again. As it is, he possesses, or acquires, inner courage and fortitude that make him worthy to be called a hero. Like Sally, he is able to "bear up" under adverse circumstances and emerge triumphant. Here are two people who are not rescuer and rescued but rather are separate individuals who must work out their salvation alone, although their strength is augmented by the love and loyalty they have for one another.

In "A Conquest of Humility," the male lead is at first seen in a very inauspicious light, having left his bride at the altar. Lawrence is in turn deserted by the girl who lured him away from Delia, so that he suffers a double burden of opprobrium. Summoning the wedding-guests, he atones for his humiliation of Delia by proposing to her once more in the presence of the community. He is thereby effecting a psychological rescue of the heroine, who has also suffered public scorn as a jilted woman. By showing his willingness to assume an additional share of contempt and ridicule, Lawrence evinces an unexpected measure of courage. He has raised himself to the level of Delia, who also faced her ordeal bravely by wearing her wedding-clothes in public, as if daring the people to pity her. With the community presented as a mocking society that enjoys watching its victims writhe, both hero and heroine emerge as admirable in defying malicious gossip. If Lawrence saves Delia by giving her an opportunity to reject him before the village (as she does, initially), Delia in turn is the rescuer of her lover. As if recognizing that Lawrence has now redeemed himself, and that the two are equal in their defiant stance against the village, she backs down from her proud refusal and cries out, "You needn't look at him in that way. . . . I am going to marry him" (p. 436). This story illustrates the protective courage of both hero and heroine, each of whom becomes unwilling to see the other vilified

by the community. The reversal of the usual rescue-pattern emphasizes that such courage is not the prerogative of one sex only.

This variation is also found in stories that center around a male protagonist. I have already dealt with Marcus Woodman of "A Conflict Ended," who has "taken to sitting on the church steps the way other men take to smoking and drinking" (pp. 396-397). I have also discussed Barney Thayer of Pembroke, grimly isolated in his unfinished house. Both men are in a sense rescued by their sweethearts. Esther and Charlotte both reveal their willingness to undergo social disapproval; Esther offers to sit on the steps of the meeting-house with Marcus, and Charlotte is ready to risk being expelled from church membership for going to tend Barney in his own house. Each woman demonstrates courage in being ready to defy public opinion. Each man in turn responds, his affection and concern for the woman breaking down the barrier of self-will. It is difficult, in the last analysis, to say who has rescued whom in these stories.

In contrast, the story "Robins and Hammers" presents a more traditional rescue. Lois's suitor is finally restored to her after he hears that she is ill and possibly dying. While she was acting independently, he made a point of staying away from her, although his attitude was partly justified in that she refused to explain why she had postponed the wedding. They are

reconciled, Lois realizing that her sacrificial role was silly and unnecessary. Mrs. Freeman, however, carries the story a step further; she concludes it with the renewed sounds of the carpenters' hammers. This touch could be ironic, reinforcing the idea that John, now restored to his role as protector of a totally dependent girl, is willing to finish the new house and carry her into it. John's character is given a slightly unpleasant twist through his insistence on playing the traditional male role. The implication is that Lois will have to relinquish all her admirable, even if misdirected, independence if she is to keep John. A man who protects his mate physically but who threatens to destroy a valuable part of her character does not fit Mrs. Freeman's definition of heroism.

John, Barney, and Marcus all reveal characteristics suggesting that Mrs. Freeman is attempting to alter another sentimental concept--the descendant of the proud and gloomy Byronic hero of romantic literature, whose life was overshadowed by some tragic destiny. Fiedler discusses this figure, who has his beginnings in the Don Juan myth and who, as Richardson's Lovelace, was to inspire numerous diluted hero-villains in nineteenth-century American fiction.[4] Brown comments, "It was inevitable, of course, that the externalities of Richardson's art should have been those most frequently copied by beginners. The seducer became a cardboard figure to be distinguished only

by name from his fellow rakes."[5] A classic example of this adaptation occurs in Mrs. A. J. Evans Wilson's St. Elmo (1866), whose central male protagonist indulges in duels, smoking, profanity, and atheism. Mrs. Freeman's heroes may assume grim poses born of their pride, but these attitudes are not made Byronic or even pseudo-Byronic. Marcus Woodman vows never to cross the church threshold during the tenure of a certain clergyman. Barney Thayer stamps out of Cephas Barnard's house after a political argument, swearing never to return. In the context of the stories, both men are overreacting to trivial matters. That the issues are trivial is implied by the author's refusal to specify exactly what either the religious or the political disagreement involved. It is how these men behave that is important. There is something essentially childish about their vindictiveness; if they cannot get their own way, they will have a tantrum. Barney may dramatize himself by railing against God and considering himself the victim of cosmic spite, but as the novel progresses he becomes a young man who would rather withdraw into sulky isolation than return to his old self. He is a close literary relative of the crabbed old Jonas who sat on the ice to spite Providence. Marcus, who no longer holds his ancient grudge, has become a prisoner of the vow he took, his habit placed prosaically in the category of the traditional male "vices" of the time, smoking and drinking. And John, estranged from his sweetheart, evinces

no apparent heartbreak; his vanity seems to be most injured. Mrs. Freeman's shift in perspective from the cosmic to the everyday shows these heroes as victims not of fate but of their own stubborn and spiteful dispositions. Only if they can break away from their isolation do they deserve to be called heroic.

The male as family provider and protector is another role that Mrs. Freeman displaces in her fiction. In "Robins and Hammers," Lois's father is a feeble individual who allowed his extravagant wife to run the family into debt. Louisa Britton's grandfather is an unpleasantly senile old man whose presence makes the family's poverty even more oppressive. Mr. King of "A Modern Dragon" is already dead when the story begins, and is referred to as a sickly man who had to depend upon his wife to run the farm. I have also mentioned the fathers of Inez Morse and Martha Patch; the one worked all his life to clear the mortgage on his land, and the other never completed his house because of his horror of debt. These weak male parents, ironically, sometimes act after death by continuing to stand between their children and happy, fulfilled lives. Martha is a victim of inherited overscrupulousness, and Inez is neurotically dedicated to her father's memory. Such stories illustrate an additional facet of Mrs. Freeman's technique of displacement. These male heads of households do no good to their children, either in life or in death. "The Revolt of Mother"

more specifically reinforces the reversal of the Strong Father image, demonstrating that Adoniram Penn's obstinate materialism is detrimental to the welfare of his family. Adoniram is overcome finally by Sarah, whose strength is founded not on selfishness but on self-mastery and love. The effect of these stories is to focus on the heroine as the more important figure, either as a courageous individual or as the victim of subtle parental influences. Mrs. Freeman is not necessarily unsympathetic toward these ineffectual father-figures--most of them are presented compassionately--but she is making it clear that all husbands and fathers are not by definition good men and good providers. In this way she further undercuts the convention of the hero as physically protective.

The traditional hero is also displaced in Mrs. Freeman's fiction through her alteration of the sentimental attitude that heroines supposedly evinced toward their lovers. For "his" sake, the sentimental heroine might endure great hardships; a classic example is found in Rose Hartwick Thorpe's "Curfew Must Not Ring Tonight," in which the girl whose lover was to be executed at sunset prevents the curfew bell from tolling by suspending herself from the clapper. For "his" sake, the heroine would give up her claims upon her lover to her rival, such as Gerty does in Cummins's The Lamplighter. For "his" sake, this heroine would be willing to spend her life as a secular nun, should the two be prevented irrevocably from marrying;

Alice Dunscombe in Cooper's The Pilot takes such a step. Many of Mrs. Freeman's stories, however, present an implicit denial of this man-centered universe.

Freeman heroines may undergo severe ordeals, both physical and psychological, but such feats of endurance are usually not for the sake of a lover but for themselves. Louisa Britton carries a large quantity of food home under a broiling sun, acting in defiance against the lover whom she does not want as a husband. By her fortitude she is demonstrating that Jonathan is irrelevant in her life; she does not need his protection in order to survive. Delia Caldwell wears her wedding outfit just as though she were not a jilted bride; she shows that she can exist without a man's name and a man's ring as accessories to this finery. Luella Norcross gives a man who is not her suitor, but a known murderer, the opportunity to rob and kill her, and lies awake all night waiting for him. She undergoes this terrible night-watch not so much to save the fugitive as to save herself from having to make a decision about giving him up to the authorities; here is the sacrificial ordeal as cop-out. Even Hannah Redman, who apparently follows the convention in letting herself be called a thief in order to protect her lover, is not simply a martyr. She seems almost to relish her position, enjoying a feeling of superiority to the rest of the community. Later, her horrified reaction at having stolen shows that her self-respect and pride are more important

to her than George's good name. In each of these stories, the welfare of the male character is made less relevant than that of the heroine, whose inner courage--or lack of it--provides the central theme.

In the popular fictional tradition, the heroine may relinquish her claim on the hero in order to allow the other woman to have him. In order to twist the knife further, she might risk her own life to save that of the rival, rescuing her from drowning as Gerty does in The Lamplighter, or else nursing her through a dangerous and infectious disease. Mrs. Freeman alters the whole significance of this convention in some of her stories by means of a slight but important shift in focus. The heroine may give her lover up to the rival, but her motives for doing so are quite different. "A Moral Exigency" shows Eunice submitting to the sentimental code by giving Burr back to Ada, who was engaged to him. But Eunice is given another reason for the change of heart. She recalls her school days, in which she pretended that the younger Ada was her little girl. It is her protective instinct toward a frailer sister--one who cannot do without a man--that seems to help in furthering Eunice's decision. She gives Burr back for the sake of Ada's health and happiness; his own inclinations are largely irrelevant. Mrs. Freeman uses this theme a great deal in her later fiction, unfortunately sentimentalizing it; probably the worst example occurs in her novel By the Light of the Soul,

in which Maria, the heroine, pretends to be dead so that her adored younger sister may (bigamously) marry Maria's own husband. The disputed lover in such tales becomes a kind of consolation prize for the weaker girl, one that she needs in order to make up for her own lack of courage and independence.

The displacement of the male protagonist's relationship to the heroine is one of Mrs. Freeman's most common devices in her early fiction. She does not reveal a basic contempt for men; indeed, she gives many of them a heroic stature comparable to that of her heroines. She is, however, rewriting the conventional male-female sentimental pattern by demonstrating that strength and weakness are not a matter of sex but of inner character. Her technique points toward her theme of individual heroism as an important goal for both men and women; she is saying that the sentimentally based sex-roles are an inadequate framework for this theme.

NOTES

Epigraph: Love and Death in the American Novel, p. 52.

[1] Brown, p. 292. From The Children of Light (New York, 1853).

[2] Ibid., p. 294. From Beulah (New York, 1859).

[3] Williams, p. 173.

[4] Fiedler, pp. 47, 49, 256.

[5] Brown, p. 46.

CHAPTER VIII

> But it is quite true that I read nothing which could be said even remotely to influence me. If I had been influenced I should have written very differently because most of my own work, is not really the kind I myself like. I want more symbolism, more mysticism. I left that out, because it struck me that people did not want it, and I was forced to consider selling qualities. Of course I tried to make my work good along its own lines. I would not have written for money alone.
>
> --Mary Wilkins Freeman

In her early fiction Mary Wilkins Freeman presented characters whose strength and endurance, as they battled opposing social forces, were made quite irrelevant to the conventional sex-roles of the sentimental hero and heroine. I have discussed the way in which she structured her best short fiction, emphasizing the inner courage of both heroines and heroes, and setting aside the usual attributes based on feminine frailty and masculine protectiveness. When she turned in her later works to more traditional protagonists, her theme of heroic endurance was to be largely obscured by a greater dependence upon male and female role-playing. Even in the few novels that do contain an older, unromantic protagonist, Mrs. Freeman found

it necessary to insert a token love affair, as though for the benefit of her readers. It is my intention in this chapter to demonstrate that this shift in emphasis seriously compromised her later work.

Why Mary Wilkins Freeman virtually abandoned her unromantic central character after Pembroke is not certain. Perhaps an earlier letter provides a clue: "I hope people won't tire of my old woman," she wrote to Miss Booth in 1885.[1] The "old woman" still dominates in Pembroke as she did in Jane Field, but she is to reappear only once as heroine of a novel in Mrs. Freeman's later years; she is cast as Sylvia Whitman in The Shoulders of Atlas (1908). It may well be that Mrs. Freeman decided that this sort of figure was too unromantic to hold reader interest for works of novel length, although it might continue to suffice for short stories. According to Henry Nash Smith, Cooper is another example of the deep-rooted conviction that a novel required the presence of a love interest, preferably one that was centered around the hero.[2] The pattern of many of Mrs. Freeman's later novels suggests that she had decided to make a similar concession to public taste. Smith states that "Cooper was . . . led to experiment with younger heroes who . . . were more easily converted into lovers than Leatherstocking ."[3] In much the same way, Mrs. Freeman discarded her "old woman" in order to make way for young heroines and heroes with romantic potential. They might still be depicted in conflict with an adverse

environment, but their struggles as courageous individuals were often blurred and distorted by their involvement in a conventional love plot. Heroes who must assume masculine poses and heroines who must behave in a feminine manner have much less opportunity to show the kind of inward heroism that Mrs. Freeman fashioned and favored in her earlier stories. Jerome (1897), The Portion of Labor (1901), and By the Light of the Soul (1906) all contain protagonists over whose psychological development some care was taken. Mrs. Freeman attempted to present Jerome Edwards, Ellen Brewster, and Maria Edgeham as individuals who were greatly influenced from early childhood by their social surroundings. But the characterizations of all three suffer through their creator's adherence to the traditional plot scheme. I will use Jerome[4] to illustrate the unfortunate weakening of the Freeman protagonist through the necessity the author felt for giving this figure a love interest. Most of what I have to say about Jerome Edwards could apply equally to Ellen Brewster or Maria Edgeham; I have chosen Jerome in particular because it has certain superficial parallels with Pembroke, a novel in which the young hero is not primarily a romantic figure.

Jerome and Barney appear to have certain likenesses; Foster avers that Jerome is "closely kin in spirit to Barney of Pembroke."[5] Indeed, Jerome becomes enveloped in an isolating pride that separates him from his sweetheart in much the same way that Barney is imprisoned by

his obstinacy and unable to return to Charlotte. But the differences between these novels are more significant than the likenesses. Jerome begins on a serious note with the motif of poverty uppermost--poverty that affects a small but proud boy. Pembroke likewise begins with the almost immediate discovery of what is to be the dark keynote of the book: the proud and obstinate will that affects both its possessors and their loved ones. While Pembroke maintains its theme of pride and isolating will, Jerome soon shifts ground because of the imposition of a love plot involving the hero.

The intended theme of Jerome involves the reaction of its hero to an environment in which the poor are exposed to neglect and exploitation. Mrs. Freeman's earlier motif of the proud independence of the poor is also present, although she is more concerned in this novel, as in many subsequent ones, with explicit social reform. She even includes a spokesman for the social philosophy she is attempting to present: Ozias Lamb, Jerome's cynical uncle. Jerome is supposed to develop social awareness through listening to the comments of this man. Ozias's speeches are unfortunately too long, and too obviously slanted, for proper effect. More convincing as a childhood influence is Ann Edwards, Jerome's crippled mother. As poor as she is, Ann is fiercely independent; she takes grim satisfaction in being able to send a bowl of parsnip stew to the doctor's wife. The arrogant Dr. Prescott may hold the mortgage on

the Edwards land, but the poor Edwards family is nevertheless able to give something to the Prescott household. Growing up in such a defiantly proud atmosphere, Jerome appears quite plausibly as a character who maintains a heroic stance before the indifferent or calculating rich. Not only is he determined to take nothing he has not earned, but he evinces a desire to help the other poor people as best he can. He becomes a self-taught "herb doctor" who assists at sickbeds, thereby competing with Dr. Prescott, who is always ready to accept land in lieu of fees from his destitute patients. Jerome even makes a promise to remain poor all his life:

> Simon Basset looked at him. "If ye had a big fortune left ye, s'pose ye'd give it all away, would ye?"
>
> "Yes, sir, I would." Jerome blushed a little with a brave modesty before the concentrated fire of eyes, but he never unbent his proud young neck as he faced Simon Basset.
>
> "S'pose ye'd give away every dollar?"
>
> "Yes, sir, I would--every dollar."
>
> (p. 219)

Jerome's one-man protest against a society that oppresses the poor is even anticipated in the full title of the novel--Jerome: A Poor Man.

Jerome's romance with Lucina, daughter of the wealthy and benevolent Squire Merritt, intrudes upon the vow of poverty that was presumably the focus of his life. Had the love affair been kept more in the background, stressed only as one source of conflict resulting from

this vow, it would not necessarily have distorted the novel. As it stands, the romantic interest dominates the book entirely and transforms Jerome from a "poor man" and social crusader to a dreaming hero who is more preoccupied with wooing his lady than with improving the lot of his fellow paupers. In her earlier stories, Mrs. Freeman was not bound by traditional male roles; she pointed out that a man might evince courage even though he failed to protect his wife or sweetheart in the conventional manner. In Jerome, however, the hero reacts according to the standard pattern of masculine behavior. He refuses to marry Lucina because he is poor, averring that he could not bear to see her living in poverty. On the other hand, he will not accept money from her father: "I give my wife all or nothing" (p. 367). The same principle applies when Lucina inherits twenty thousand dollars; Jerome refuses to accept money from his wife. It is valid to present a point of conflict in which the man dedicated to poverty is tempted with an opportunity to be wealthy, but to express this conflict chiefly through a love affair weakens the emphasis upon him as a heroic defender of principle. Jerome becomes an arrogant male who refuses to allow a female to be the provider; he is no longer the proud poor man rejecting riches. Mrs. Freeman's imposition of a dominant love story alters the entire focus of the novel; Jerome ends as a selfish and isolated individual who allows his pride to keep him from the woman he loves, a woman who is dying

of heartbreak. Jerome finally overcomes his pride and returns to Lucina, fulfilling the traditional ending of a romantic novel. Mrs. Freeman resorts to a trick in order to provide a final sop to her hero's self-esteem. A letter is discovered that stipulates that Lucina's inheritance is to be shared with Jerome, should the two marry; Jerome is thereby saved from having to be supported by his wife. I need hardly say that this resolution negates everything that Jerome presumably stood for earlier in the novel; apparently his vow to give away any large sums of money he received had a time limit.

In contrast, Pembroke's hero Barney Thayer does not undergo such a shift in characterization; he remains a basically unromantic character throughout. He is one victim of the obstinate and isolating pride that lies at the thematic center of the novel. Mrs. Freeman's social motif--hereditary and environmental pressures acting upon the individual--is implicit rather than explicit; she illustrates it effectively through her characters' actions rather than commenting upon it overtly as she does in Jerome. Barney's interrupted romance is kept in perspective as one result of the obstinacy that rules him, rather than being made the most important motif of the novel. The reason for Barney's initial rebellion and his vow to isolate himself from the Barnard family does not have its beginnings in a lovers' tiff, nor does it arise out of a quarrel with a heavy father who forbade the marriage. I

think it is important that Mrs. Freeman carefully refrained from basing the difference of opinion on either of these sentimental grounds. She indicated it briefly as an argument arising from political disagreement; by this maneuver she is emphasizing that Barney's act is not that of a conventional romantic hero, since its motivation has nothing to do with Charlotte. Unlike Jerome, Barney is not primarily a proud man isolated from his sweetheart. He is shut out from all society, and Charlotte is only one of many against whom the doors are locked. Barney is maintained throughout the novel as an individual with a psychological problem, not as a hero in love. If at the end he does rescue Charlotte, she simultaneously rescues him from himself, as I have already mentioned. Barney's salvation is the true climax of the novel. The end of Pembroke contrasts sharply with that of Jerome, in which the lovers are reunited and about to merge with the radiance of the setting sun--or, more precisely, of the fortunate inheritance. Pembroke concludes in a different way:

> He reached the top of the hill, and went into the yard of the Barnard house. Sarah Barnard saw him coming, and shrieked out, "There's Barney, there's Barney Thayer comin'! He's walkin', he's walkin' straight as anybody!"
>
> When Barney reached the door, they all stood there--Cephas and Sarah and Charlotte.
>
> . . .
>
> Charlotte came forward, and he put his arm around her. Then he looked over her head at her father. "I've come back," said he.
>
> "Come in," said Cephas.
>
> And Barney entered the house with his old sweetheart and his old self.
>
> (pp. 329-330)

Although Charlotte has a part to play in this reconciliation, she appears in company with her parents; Barney's return is not for her benefit alone. And his first words are directed not to her but "over her head" to Cephas. His return to the Barnard house is a symbolic return to society, not just a lovers' reunion. The final words of the novel refer not to Charlotte but to Barney's self, which has finally been healed of its long sickness. Pembroke differs from Jerome by concentrating throughout upon its hero as an isolated figure undergoing spiritual stress, and does not permit the romantic thread to obscure the more serious theme of the will as a dominant social force.

The introduction of Lucina as the token heroine of Jerome is an unfortunate maneuver. Lucina is obviously a superficial interpolation, created so that Jerome may fall in love and thereby complicate his vow to remain poor. She is almost completely two-dimensional, possessing no more vitality than the china shepherdess she resembles. Only once does she emerge as a believable creation. In one of the few strong sequences in this novel, Lucina is found moving restlessly about her aunt's parlor, unable to find peace in this spinsterly atmosphere of steel engravings and "friendship's offering" albums. She goes into the garden only to find that this usually serene bower has altered. "The garden was down-crushed, its extreme of sweetness pressed out beneath the torrid sunbeams as under

flaming hoofs. Lucina passed between the wilting ranks and flattened beds of flowers, and the breath of them in her face was like the rankest sweetness of love, when its delicacy, even for itself, is all gone. The pungent odor of box was like a shameless call from the street" (p. 350). Lucina's nature responds, an underlying passion breaking forth through her modest exterior. Forgetting her passivity, she runs to Jerome and finds him sleeping in the woods. "In Jerome she seemed to see herself also, the unity of the man and woman in love dawned upon her maiden imagination. She felt as if Jerome's hands were her hands, his breath hers. 'I never knew he looked like me before,' she thought with awe" (p. 363). For a moment Mrs. Freeman was able to instil life into this feebly depicted heroine. Lucina is no longer the stereotyped passive maiden awaiting the pleasure of her lover, but a woman of awakened passion who realizes that real love transcends the accepted sex-roles. In both Lucina and her creator, the heat of flesh and blood overcomes the excess of delicacy. Almost at once, however, Lucina's conviction of her right to seek her lover fades, and she becomes again the blushing maiden. It is as though Mrs. Freeman decided that this boldness was not suitable for a genteel novel and accordingly made her heroine revert to the standard demure pose. It is surprising that she allowed this passage, with its frankly sexual overtones, to remain.

Mrs. Freeman's shallow characterization of Lucina

weakens the novel, for it is difficult to sympathize with Jerome's affection for such a cardboard creature. Had she been presented with a touch of individuality, as a woman willing to share his poverty and his dedication to the poor--or else as a frivolous creature whose love of finery would make her an unsuitable mate--her presence would be more justified. But she is given no depth; she moves, with the one exception I have cited, through the accepted pattern of the sentimental heroine, watching at the window for her lover and eventually going into a decline when he leaves her. She is the same sort of ingenue that Mrs. Freeman depicted ironically in her earlier fiction, except that here she is treated seriously rather than gently mocked.

Charlotte Barnard in Pembroke may appear at first to have the same function as Lucina in that she is the hero's sweetheart. But Charlotte's presence is much more justifiable than that of the squire's pretty daughter. With Deborah Thayer present, Charlotte cannot quite be called the central heroine; she possesses enough force, however, to be an acceptable co-heroine even if she lacks the stature of her intended mother-in-law. Whereas Lucina is only the stereotyped Pure Maiden, Charlotte is three-dimensional; she has strength and her own share of stubbornness. Although fair and blue-eyed, she is not fragile; she is "as tall as Barnabas and as handsome" (p. 8). Such a description suggests an equality between the lovers--

an equality that Mrs. Freeman suggested briefly in Jerome and then rejected. Throughout the novel, Charlotte maintains herself as a strong and enduring person, not simply a woman rejected by her lover. This is not to say, as Westbrook avers, that she is comparable to Hester Prynne;[6] such a suggestion is unfair to both heroines. Charlotte is heroic in a realistic rather than a romantic or allegorical context. She is human enough to weep at one point, succumbing briefly to the needling of her cousin Rose. Yet she is able to recover and to try on the wedding-dress without a tremor, much as the jilted Delia Caldwell was able to wear her bridal outfit in public. Later she gives the gown to her aunt, whose lover returned as Barney did not; here is an additional ordeal for her to face with courage. She earns her living as the village seamstress, working on the wedding-gowns of other girls while remembering the one she never wore. But this unworn wedding dress, a symbol of the broken romance, does not dominate the scene; it appears only occasionally as a ghostly reminder of one unhappy result of Barney's obstinacy. Pembroke may be the tragedy of Deborah Thayer, but it does not represent the tragedy of Charlotte Barnard. Rather it reveals her as a courageous woman who refuses to react to her loss by becoming a sentimental martyr to love. She is strong enough to resist Barney when he tries to embrace her outside the house where he has isolated himself; she also sends back his gifts. Possessing her own pride,

she refuses to be like Rose, who will do anything for the sake of a man. She realizes also that even a partial reconciliation between Barney and herself is useless if he does not first conquer his stubborn pride. Thomas Payne, her other suitor, creates a realistic tension in her mind; she intends to remain faithful to Barney, whom she loves, yet at the same time she finds herself attracted by Thomas. Here is a drastic departure from the convention; one could not imagine the pale Lucina looking at another man even for an instant. At the end of the novel, Charlotte departs quite calmly from the accepted standards of female modesty by going to Barney's house when he is ill. She defies her father and risks expulsion from the church congregation; yet she does not act like a martyr who is sacrificing her good name for her lover. She says simply, "I'm doing what I think is right," and refuses to let either her family or public opinion sway her. If Lucina is a token heroine, Charlotte belongs with the vital, unconventionally presented heroines of Mrs. Freeman's earlier fiction.

The strong attraction between Barney and Charlotte is realistically presented from the beginning; their eagerness to be near one another hints at a strong physical attraction. In contrast, Jerome and Lucina are merely two pretty boy-and-girl silhouettes in an engraving. The separation of the central lovers in Pembroke is made an additional pressure upon them as individuals endeavoring to

maintain self-integrity; the separation in Jerome is itself given undue prominence. Charlotte, unlike Lucina, is not simply placed in the novel to provide romantic interest. Mary Wilkins Freeman sees love as an interaction necessary for psychological well-being. Charlotte represents the love that Barney has turned his back upon and that is ultimately to prove his salvation. Pembroke would have had much less force without Charlotte, whereas Jerome might have been much improved if Lucina had been omitted altogether.

Pembroke is proof that Mary Wilkins Freeman was capable of writing a novel without diminishing the stature of her protagonists as individuals under stress. Barney and Charlotte may be lovers, but they are first of all separate people who must face the adverse pressures of their surroundings. They are not simply figures who behave according to the stereotyped roles of male and female. In the longer Jerome, and in many subsequent novels, Mrs. Freeman abandons her unromantic protagonists and focuses upon the love affair to the serious detriment of her original intention. Her central figures cease to be individuals struggling to preserve self-integrity or attempting to reform unhappy social conditions. Rather they become the participants of a traditional romance, and all their commitments toward self or toward other victims of society are set aside in favor of sacred and sentimental love. Mrs. Freeman's theme of moral courage

irrespective of sex is obscured in many of her novels through the romantic roles that she imposes upon both hero and heroine.

Even in the few novels that contain an older, unromantic protagonist, Mary Wilkins Freeman still finds it necessary to insert a token love story. As an example of this unfortunate juxtaposition, I will use The Debtor, contrasting it with Pembroke and also with The Shoulders of Atlas, both of which novels include love interests that are displaced from the central position and that are functional rather than irrelevant.

The Debtor[7] contains an unromantic male protagonist: Arthur Carroll, father of a grown family. Carroll was cheated by a business associate in his youth and in consequence has turned against society. He customarily establishes himself in a community as the well-to-do and socially prominent Colonel Carroll, thereby ensuring that his credit is good. He then lives like a rich man until he has accumulated so many debts that he is compelled to leave town. The members of Carroll's family reflect the results of his dishonesty: his wife is completely unabashed about leaving bills unpaid, his elder daughter marries a rich old man for his money, and his young son is a petty thief. Various members of the community are also adversely affected because of their confidence in Carroll and his subsequent failure to pay his debts. Mrs. Freeman has initially set up her hero as a hostile and isolated man

whose apparent urbanity is a mask for his resentment of society. He is destructive both to himself and to all others who are associated with him.

Even though her central theme included enough potential interest to carry it alone, Mrs. Freeman thought it essential to include a romantic thread. She might have followed the design of Pembroke, which sets forth the ever-widening circles of unhappiness and tragedy that spread throughout a village, given the initial presence of a destructively obstinate will. But she does not present The Debtor primarily as a delineation of the far-reaching consequences for society of a single isolated and resentful individual. Instead, she introduces a totally irrelevant motif: the romance that develops between Carroll's younger daughter Charlotte and the local grocer-lawyer, Randolph. She spends an inordinate amount of time detailing the gradual dawning of affection between these two characters, although their story could have been summed up in two sentences: Boy Meets Girl, Boy Gets Girl. The romance is given equal time with the story of Carroll, but the two parts of the novel almost never touch; rather the author adopts a kind of soap-opera technique, alternating Carroll's episodes with those of the lovers and never making any real connection between these two disparate story lines. While Pembroke contains several romantic threads that are effectively worked into the main theme, the love-plot in The Debtor is self-contained. It is never

even suggested that Carroll's dishonesty might interrupt the progress of the romance. If Charlotte were affected in the slightest degree by her father's dishonesty, she might have some reason for existence, but she is utterly and implausibly innocent of all that is going on in this household that just manages to keep ahead of the sheriff. She has been created solely for the purpose of providing the love interest, and her suitor has in turn apparently been brought forth just for her.

As a result, The Debtor suffers from a constant series of interruptions dealing with the progress of the romance. It would perhaps have been a slightly more readable novel had Mrs. Freeman omitted the Randolph-Charlotte motif entirely and concentrated more wholeheartedly on the psychological struggles of her hero. As it is, the strongest parts of the novel are weakened by the romantic irrelevancies. For example, the climax of the novel, in which Arthur Carroll is besieged by an angry mob of citizens demanding that he pay what he owes them, is robbed of much of its impact simply because it was preceded by a romantic interlude. Charlotte discovers a tramp asleep in the woods and runs for protection into Randolph's arms. This scene could have been made important in the progress of the novel. Seeing the sleeping vagrant, Charlotte is overcome by a sense of evil that is quite new in her experience. Mrs. Freeman might have used this revelation effectively by making it prefigure

the girl's realization that her beloved father was also a kind of criminal. This interlude is made only an excuse, however, for the heroine to collapse into the strong embrace of the hero. When Charlotte does discover her father's true character, she shuts her eyes to the reality and affirms,"I will never desert papa." She will, of course, desert her papa for her lover when it is time to end this tedious novel. Arthur Carroll expiates his wickedness by taking on an occupation that he considers degrading: he blackens his face and dances in a minstrel show. More important for the sentimental reader, Charlotte and Randolph finally decide to marry.

In contrast, Pembroke presents several love stories that contribute to the theme and that are displaced in that they are not the chief concern either of Barney, the central male protagonist, or his mother Deborah, the real heroine. Deborah is the strongest "old woman" of Mrs. Freeman's fiction; her character is shaped by the obstinate will that dominates the book. How the various characters react to this will constitutes the action of the novel; the reactions may be expressed through love affairs, but the sentimental content is not stressed. Four sets of couples emerge: Barney and Charlotte, Sylvia and Richard, William and Rebecca, and even Rose and Tommy. Each couple has a definite role.

I will begin with the apparently superficial romance of Rose Berry and Tommy. Rose is the typically

silly and sentimental heroine that Mrs. Freeman has caricatured before, except that in this novel she is given a more frankly erotic nature. She has a physical need for a man--any man--because of her over-romantic attitude toward love. In the book she has an important function: she acts as a foil to Charlotte. Charlotte loves Barney but is capable of living without him; she may be seriously affected by the separation, but she will not manifest an excessive emotional reaction. Rose, on the other hand, is quite willing to turn from Barney, who flirted with her but who does not really care for her, to Tommy, who is available. These two are married virtually after the first kiss, and their hasty union serves as a contrast to the continuing, steadfast relationship between Barney and Charlotte who are, in the words of Edgar Lee Masters, "wedded through separation."[8] Their love is far more true than the shallow attraction between Rose and Tommy.

The romance of William Berry and Rebecca Thayer and their consequent furtive marriage is an indirect result of the obstinate pride of Deborah and Barney. After the quarrel and Barney's defiance of his mother's orders to make it up, Deborah decides to break with the Barnards and all their relations--including the Berrys. She forbids Rebecca to have anything more to do with William. Rebecca disobeys, naturally enough; she is fond of him, and she has inherited a modicum of her mother's obstinacy. Secrecy makes the affair progress rapidly.

Deborah discovers that the girl is pregnant and sends her out of the house; she then orders Barney to find William and "make him marry Rebecca," this representing her final duty toward her disowned child. Throughout, one is aware not so much of Rebecca herself as of Deborah, who is constantly pulling the strings; she first insisted that Rebecca was "kind of favored" by William and then tried to prevent the two from seeing one another. Both incidents could heighten whatever interest Rebecca had in this young man. The marriage occurs in an atmosphere of shame and self-reproach; even ten years later, Rebecca is ashamed to show herself in public. Because of the stern will of Deborah Thayer, her daughter is condemned to a miserable existence.

Yet another romantic thread involves the prolonged courtship of Sylvia, Charlotte's aunt, and Richard Alger. This courtship is abruptly curtailed on the night of Barney's quarrel with Cephas. Sylvia is not at home when Richard calls; she has been persuaded to stay with the disrupted Barnard household. With his customary ritual interrupted, Richard finds it impossible to visit Sylvia again. A distant relative of Barney, Richard is endowed with something of the same obstinacy, although it is not based upon conscious spite. I have already mentioned the scene in which Sylvia mistakes Barney for his cousin. Barney experiences a revelation:"Was he not like Richard Alger in his own desertion of Charlotte

Barnard? And had not Sylvia been as little at fault in taking one for the other as if they had been twin brothers? Might there not be a closer likeness between characters than features--perhaps by a repetition of sins and deformities? And might not one now and then be able to see it?" (pp. 174-175).

Later, Richard sees Sylvia being taken to the poorhouse and rushes out to save her; this is saved from being a sentimental rescue by its symbolic anticipation of the scene in which Barney is likewise to be shocked out of his proud isolation by the realization of what may befall Charlotte. Richard and Sylvia act as counterpoint to Barney and Charlotte; through Richard Barney sees what is happening to him, and in Sylvia Charlotte sees what she may become if she lapses into self-pity.

I have already mentioned that the love between Barney and Charlotte is displaced in that it is not central to the novel, although it is still important. Deborah does not function as the blocking character who keeps the lovers apart by forbidding the marriage. Her blocking involves the more serious--and unromantic--separation of Barney not only from his sweetheart but from all society. Near the end of the book, the "displaced" romance is moved to a more prominent position--one that can be defended structurally. Deborah dominates the scene until her death; she is unquestionably the central female protagonist. When she dies, a victim of her implacable will and her

refusal to admit the existence of human affection, Charlotte is moved forward to take her place. Charlotte is one of the watchers by the body of Deborah; this touch could reflect not only a local custom but a demonstration that the younger woman has survived the older one. For Barney to be redeemed from the grim influence of his mother (obstinate pride), he must open his heart to Charlotte (love). Deborah accordingly makes way for the younger heroine, not only in the plot but in the mind of Barney. I cannot agree with Granville Hicks that Pembroke, "as sharp a study of New England crabbedness as has ever been written," concludes with "a happy ending that violated every premise she had laid down."[9] Hicks fails to see that this resolution emerges from a premise established earlier in the novel: that the isolation of self from the love of others is destructive to the human spirit. Her resolution is Hawthornian, upholding the power of true affection to break through the walls of the prison; it is therefore optimistic, but it is certainly not a sentimental distortion of the framework of her novel.

The structure of Pembroke illustrates Mrs. Freeman's ability to displace not one but several love affairs in order to keep her central theme and central protagonists in the correct perspective. In novels such as The Debtor she did not even try to integrate the romance; she simply interpolated it as though she were not concerned with its function other than to provide a bit of sentimental

titillation for the reader. What I have said about this novel could apply as well to Jane Field, or more drastically to Doc Gordon, in which the love story of the ingenue reaches melodramatic proportions. I should like to spend a little time in discussing The Shoulders of Atlas,[10] a hitherto neglected novel that is certainly not as good as Pembroke but that contains some strong writing. Foster states that The Shoulders of Atlas is a "valuable complement" to the earlier regional material of Mrs. Freeman.[11] I think that its value extends to being an effective presentation of an unromantic heroine whose character is emphasized partly through the presence of a displaced love story. This novel demonstrates that the author was able to return to earlier techniques even though she had produced a considerable quantity of hack writing in the meantime. In this book she discarded her earnest young heroes and heroines as well as her middle-aged male protagonists and returned to her "old woman"--whom she probably should never have abandoned in the first place.

The Shoulders of Atlas involves Sylvia Whitman, a New England matron with a guilty conscience. Her strict honesty is challenged when she discovers that the property she has just inherited apparently belongs to someone else. Although the plot resembles a rewriting of Jane Field in that Sylvia refuses to give up her fortune and tries to atone for her dishonesty in other ways, the two novels are actually quite dissimilar. The psychological situation

is kept central in this later book. Sylvia adopts Rose, the rightful heiress, and showers luxuries upon her, but she is still unable to quell the voice of conscience.

Rose is provided by the author with a love affair involving a suitor who is barely sketched in. The development of the romance is also indicated only by a few brief scenes; this treatment is a considerable improvement over the long-drawn-out exchanges of glances in The Debtor. It is Sylvia who dominates the story, just as she dominates the quiet and passive Rose. The romantic element is important in the novel because it affects Sylvia psychologically: it is significant that Rose has fallen in love, not that she has fallen in love with Horace in particular. It is perhaps a deliberate maneuver that he is scarcely delineated as a personality; a "flat" character in an otherwise competently written Freeman story often indicates that the anonymity has significance.

Several possible motives are suggested for Sylvia's preoccupation with her pretty ward. To begin with, Sylvia is childless and enjoys mothering Rose. Because of her deception, she would rather have the girl remain single indefinitely so that she, Sylvia, may continue to support and indulge her and thereby ease her conscience. In addition, she is worried because she has found out about an incident in Rose's childhood: an incident the girl cannot recall herself except as something terrible that would make her insane if she ever remembered it. Sylvia does

not share the knowledge with Rose any more than the author shares it with the reader. Mrs. Freeman's reticence in reporting Sylvia's discovery suggests that the girl was sexually molested; if this is the case, a further pressure is hereby exerted upon Sylvia in that she fears what might happen to Rose's mind if she did marry. Finally, the affection that the older woman has for this young and pretty girl has been interpreted as sexual rather than simply maternal,[12] and this interpretation is not entirely without basis. Westbrook points out that Sylvia rather excessively enjoys fondling Rose and insists on helping to dress her,[13] although the latter might mean only that Sylvia is attempting to fill the role of the lady's maid that Rose once had. The novel also includes an episode in which Sylvia "courts" Rose by offering her the jewels that formed part of the inheritance--a sequence that Mrs. Freeman herself likens to the jewel scene in Faust. With all these possible motivations at work, the love story in this novel functions as an unusual sort of triangle involving Rose, Horace, and a tormented woman whose jealousy and concern stem from an uneasy mixture of guilt and affection, the latter containing possible sexual overtones. The focus of the book remains not upon the romance, but upon Sylvia's reaction to it.

It is unfortunate that at the end of this novel the psychological emphasis on the heroine is weakened in order to provide the conventional happy ending. Sylvia

dominates the scene in part by confessing before the assembled wedding guests, but all her other problems involving Rose seem to have been set aside by Mrs. Freeman in order that the young couple may finally marry. In addition, other couples emerge from the wings and join hands. This multiple-romance ending is all too characteristic of many of Mrs. Freeman's novels; the exception is Pembroke, in which the various romantic connections, as I have shown, occur for a purpose and are distributed throughout the novel. The Shoulders of Atlas represents a considerable improvement over most Freeman novels in that Sylvia, by confessing her guilt, still manages to hold the center of the stage at the end. If sentiment intrudes, it is at least not as blatant as it is in The Debtor, in which the union of the lovers is made as important as the decision of the hero to atone for his misdeeds.

Pembroke and The Shoulders of Atlas are the only novels in which Mrs. Freeman makes use of the displaced love interest that appears in her early short fiction. One book deals with obstinate will, the other with various psychological burdens; the characters in each are concerned primarily with the struggle against these subtle opponents. The love stories are not used merely as decoration, but as a further means of emphasizing this struggle. When she included the romance as a sentimental trimming that did not really involve her major protagonist, Mrs. Freeman distracted attention from her intended theme and often destroyed the effect she was trying to create. The impact

of an unromantic hero or heroine is seriously weakened if a coy courtship ritual between two irrelevant lovers constantly interrupts the more serious theme. Such an interruption implies that nothing is more important, finally, than the romantic union of boy and girl--a consummation that represents a complete reversal of Mrs. Freeman's previously ironic attitude toward sentiment.

I do not intend to give the impression that Mrs. Freeman's later novels failed only because she persisted in introducing irrelevant love interests. The demands she saw as necessary for the production of popular fiction led her into excesses of sensational writing and plot tricks that, as Knipp points out, were greatly to blame in the obscuring of potentially interesting themes. But it is the interjection of sentimental love interest that distorts most seriously the presentation of her later protagonists as morally heroic individuals. Her standards for judging behavior are no longer based upon inner courage; she reverts to the sexist codes of popular fiction and emphasizes male protectiveness and female frailty. Her earlier implication that the sacredness of romantic love was a false and even destructive ideal is superseded by an insistence, in her later work, on the inclusion of a love story, as if convinced that no fictional presentation of life is complete without one. More positively, one must remember that if Mary Wilkins Freeman, like some of her own protagonists, succumbed to social pressures, at least

she did not give in to them entirely. She continued to present her themes of individual courage, even if such material was often obscured or nullified through her inclusion of sentimental plots. And through this tangle of intrigues and love affairs and "literary lying" shines the steady light of Pembroke, in which sentiment and romance are made to contribute toward the celebration of the heroic self.

NOTES

Epigraph: Letter of Mary Wilkins Freeman to F. L. Pattee, September 5, 1919, Pennsylvania State University.

[1] Letter, Mary Wilkins to Mary Louise Booth, February 17, 1885, University of Virginia.

[2] Smith, p. 65.

[3] Ibid., p. 68.

[4] Jerome: A Poor Man (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1897). All further citations to Jerome will be to this text.

[5] Foster, p. 146.

[6] Westbrook, Mary Wilkins Freeman, p. 104.

[7] The Debtor (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1905).

[8] "Anne Rutledge," lines 9-10.

[9] Hicks, p. 64.

[10] The Shoulders of Atlas (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1908).

[11] Foster, p. 177.

[12] Westbrook, Mary Wilkins Freeman, p. 157.

[13] Ibid.

CONCLUSION

The best fiction of Mary Wilkins Freeman celebrates the self-reliant individual in conflict with the restrictive pressures of society. Her sensitive case studies explore the reactions of her protagonists as they are beset by forces detrimental to their identity and autonomy. Implicit throughout this presentation is a subtle arraignment of some of the established moral tenets of Mrs. Freeman's own era. Through her defense of the independent and nonconforming spirit, she reveals that certain sacred ideals and institutions rest on very dubious foundations.

Mrs. Freeman's present critics do not go far enough in their interpretation of the conflict between individual and society that she describes. They are inclined to see her characters as essentially defeated by their environment, and to stress the presentation of these figures as curiosities set against a social background primarily of interest as a museum exhibit. The prevalent critical view is threefold. First, these characters are considered to indulge in unconventional behavior that is prima facie evidence of eccentricity (i. e., poor psychic health). Secondly, those few characters who do achieve triumphs are seen as necessarily frustrated

since their victories arise out of trivial and mundane crises in monotonous lives. And finally, these individuals are labelled as strictly regional types who act within a closed system of specific cultural institutions and idiosyncrasies. They are therefore evaluated either for their comic and nostalgic value, or else for their contribution to social and psychological studies.

I have demonstrated that much of the apparent abnormality manifested by Freeman protagonists reflects a defensible--and defensive--attitude that is assumed in order to safeguard self-integrity and independence. Given a society that is preoccupied with formalistic rituals and sentimental ideals that often mask materialism and hypocrisy, such individuals are morally heroic in their attempts to resist the pressures to conform to the accepted codes. It is society that Mrs. Freeman considers to be lacking in spiritual health.

Even if it were generally agreed that some of Mrs. Freeman's protagonists are self-reliant spirits whose efforts to oppose a conformist society are admirable and justifiable, it may appear that their struggles are not really significant since they are expressed through everyday and domestic affairs, as well as through the stuff of local color. As one anonymous reviewer of A New England Nun comments: "The poor, dingy old New England women have lost none of their bleakness, the young ones nothing of their pathetic attempt at youth under difficulties. The

kitchen operations go on as before, and over all this dismal life float rosy clouds of faith, loyalty and heroism, without which one would feel that nothing was left but suicide. . . . It is not strange that this patient monotony, these stories of self-immolation . . . prompt the feeling that martyrdom has first found its fitting garments in faded gingham."[1] The hint of sarcasm behind this apparent praise gives rise to an important question: is it possible to present heroic and universal themes in a setting of "kitchen operations" and "faded gingham"?

Van Wyck Brooks states that Mrs. Freeman's work possesses universality because of her "village birthright" --a somewhat nebulous statement, since he does not elaborate upon it.[2] I have demonstrated that seemingly trivial actions in everyday New England settings can be the outward signs of meaningful conflicts. For example, minor infractions of the existing religious codes may stand for a desire to seek the justice of God or to worship him in one's own fashion, setting aside the meaningless rituals of society. Specific regional material, such as the manners and customs pertaining to the New England parlor or meeting-house, may be used in a similar way as symbols of the psychological or spiritual condition of both society and the individual. Even humorous sketches, such as the woman in "Life-Everlastin'" who demonstrates her piety by flaunting a new and stylish bonnet, may reflect the author's criticism of false standards of morality.

To evaluate the fiction of Mary Wilkins Freeman, it is necessary to look beyond the regional and apparently superficial material that she uses. Like Hawthorne, she is conducting moral and psychological explorations of her characters. But whereas Hawthorne uses romantic allegory, employing such images as scarlet letters and bosom serpents to underline his examples of individuals under stress, Mrs. Freeman sets forth her moral conflicts through the use of manners. I am using this term according to a general definition found in Morton L. Ross's "'Manners': An Addition to a Vocabulary for American Studies." Summing up earlier attempts to define this word, he says that "whatever else manners are, they are at least the distinguishing mark of a particular culture or subculture--the shared forms or patterns of behavior that give specificity to the group life of a particular time and place."[3] Mrs. Freeman's critics interpret the local manners in her fiction only as sketches of a New England rural culture that is rapidly passing away. But as Ross points out, manners (in the broad sense of the term) may serve as an important key to the evaluation of a work of fiction, both as an artistic production and as a vehicle of social commentary.[4] I think that Mrs. Freeman's preoccupation with the daily life of her characters can be seen in the light of this more comprehensive view. She uses the manners of the New England region as a rich source of material from which to draw images and symbols that reinforce her psychological themes.

In addition, she employs local manners as the basis for her exploration--and subtle criticism--of a wider area of humanity. The specific customs and mores of which she treats are important, not so much in themselves as in the way she uses them to dissect certain ideals and institutions of her era. If she begins with kitchen operations and faded gingham, she ends by presenting her own unique celebration of the self-reliant spirit beset by pressures to conform.

Mary Wilkins Freeman's oblique attack upon sentimental literature is a feature that has been overlooked altogether by her critics, who may recognize the presence of sentiment but who do not perceive its significance. The shifting of the love plot from central place, the altered stereotypes of hero and heroine, and the displacement of the male from his traditionally protective role--all these devices point toward Mrs. Freeman's replacement of the sentimental love philosophy by a very different set of values.

The moral framework of a piece of sentimental fiction is based chiefly upon sexual purity. The physical strength of the hero, if he is present, is essentially devoted to the protection of the virginity of the heroine before marriage and of her chastity afterwards. Her life may also be saved, but this is a secondary matter. To balance the male role, the moral innocence of the heroine acts as the redemptive element necessary to raise the male

to her level, if he is not already there. This "genteel female," as Brown comments, "was the sweet taskmaster to awe by her holy beauty the wayward and the vicious. . . . She was the modern Griselda to reclaim erring man by unexampled meekness in face of basest injuries."[5] Characters in sentimental novels are accordingly described in a prescribed fashion, so that innocence--or the lack of it--is made obvious from physical data. Heroines and sirens are labeled not only through their blonde or brunette coloring but also through their names: a Mary or Alice is usually pure, while an Inez or Isabel is exotic and dangerous. The hero may be fair and clean-cut or Byronically dark and gloomy, but he is destined to become the sexual protector of the heroine--unless he is a diluted Lovelace who dies of remorse. In this type of fiction, innocence and chastity become the highest virtues; they are standards by which to measure the fitness of the protagonists for the sacred goals of marriage and parenthood.

What has Mrs. Freeman done to this established tradition? Through exaggeration and irony, she has revealed the weaknesses behind the ultra-romantic concept of courtship and marriage. She has painted love affairs in the "thin and washy" tints attributed to her by Prosser Hall Frye,[6] but she has done so in order to contrast their superficiality with her theme of heroism. She has even confused some of the accepted sexual roles and characteristics of men and women, depicting "womanish" and ineffectual males

and strong, independent females. In her fiction appear men who are admirable even though they fail to protect the heroine physically, and women who are attractive personalities even though they are unconventionally vigorous rather than frail and clinging. These reversals of the usual male-female relationships signal that Mrs. Freeman is setting aside the traditions based upon masculinity/muscle and femininity/fragility and replacing them with a new moral context. In her view, good and bad are represented by inner strength or weakness as evinced by the individual in confrontation with his society. Sex differences are irrelevant here; her characters are evaluated solely according to their susceptibility to adverse pressures and their ability to maintain integrity and self-respect. Mrs. Freeman's alteration of the established fictional love interest reinforces the central motif of her work. Instead of sexual purity, individual courage and heroism are made the highest ideals.

If the best work of Mary Wilkins Freeman gently ridicules sentiment, it is at the same time an outcry against the misuses and misinterpretations of genuine love, which she implicitly defines as an affectionate regard for others as responsible individuals. The society that she quietly condemns may force material blessings upon the poor, but it simultaneously crushes the pride that sustains them spiritually. It assumes matrimony to be unceasingly blissful (does not love conquer all?) and expects every woman to choose it

as her ultimate earthly goal. It presses empty and formalistic phrases and rituals upon unhappy souls who are desperately searching for a God in whom they can sincerely believe. All these social attitudes point to a dependence upon outward appearance and conformity rather than a recognition of, and respect for, the particular needs and desires of nonconforming individuals. Too often they are regarded as outcasts.

Mrs. Freeman's concept of misdirected love applies also to a too-great unselfishness on the part of certain individuals who allow their own identity to be submerged in a sentimental concern for others. Such martyrdom may benefit the recipients materially, but it neglects their inward, spiritual sustenance; they are denied the opportunity to share responsibilities and thereby to act as mature and independent individuals. For Mrs. Freeman, love involves a sharing of both burdens and joys, rather than a situation in which one person shelters the other from unpleasant realities.

At the other extreme, that person who isolates himself entirely from society not only limits the happiness of those who might benefit from his companionship, but also endangers his own psychic well-being. Mrs. Freeman would agree with John Donne that no man is an island; she demonstrates that a healthy self requires some interaction with other people and a real concern for them. In her view, it is important to love others in the right way, by recog-

nizing their worth as individuals and by sharing one's happiness--and one's responsibilities--with them. At the same time, she points out that it is vital to love oneself by protecting one's identity as a unique person against those forces that threaten it. To respect others as individuals and to preserve one's own individuality could well be Mary Wilkins Freeman's own interpretation of the Biblical injunction to "love thy neighbor as thyself."

In her later fiction, Mrs. Freeman's theme of individual heroism persists. Some of her psychological motifs are potentially interesting and are unusually frank for the period in which they were written--and for the audience for which they were intended. The Shoulders of Atlas hints at lesbianism in at least two of its characters and at nymphomania in a third. Doc Gordon treats of the morality of euthanasia. These themes are handled sympathetically and reveal that the author possessed a considerable amount of insight into human psychology. In other novels, social reform is prominent: factory workers battle employers in The Portion of Labor, and poor shoemakers are oppressed by the arrogant rich in Jerome. But the sensational and sentimental material, and the overt social commentary, both undercut the effect of most of this later work. The majority of Mary Wilkins Freeman's novels present a curious mixture of seriousness and sentiment, and these elements tend to neutralize each other so that the total effect is unreadability. Her works have

not survived as novels of social realism, with the exception of The Portion of Labor, cited occasionally for its theme of the working classes. But neither have they become sentimental classics such as Susan Warner's The Wide, Wide World, Mrs. Wilson's St. Elmo, or Martha Finley's "Elsie" series. Thoreau called popular fiction gingerbread; apparently the gingerbread Mrs. Freeman produced had other materials mixed with the molasses that made the product unpalatable to a lover of sweets. Yet this foreign substance--the few grains of sand in the sugar--may be all that is lasting and permanent among the later fictional efforts of Mary Wilkins Freeman, if only to prove that she did not altogether succumb in her later years to the sentimental-melodramatic school of writing.

Does Mrs. Freeman have anything significant to say to the twentieth century? In an age where so many are seeking liberation from the pressures of the established society, I think her work is pertinent. Her best fiction contains a message for those who uphold group action as the only means of achieving individual happiness; her emphasis on the courageous and heroic self harks back to Emerson's "Nothing can bring you peace but yourself"[7] and Thoreau's celebration of the "majority of one."[8] Mary Wilkins Freeman's heroic individuals are personally liberated. They have achieved a victory over their environment by maintaining their own integrity--and this is more

important, in her eyes, than any number of external social reforms. These valiant characters possess a self-sufficiency and a self-reliance that we might do well to regard as more than curious relics of nineteenth-century culture.

NOTES

[1] Review of A New England Nun, Nation, 52 (June 11, 1891), 484.

[2] Brooks, p. 464.

[3] "'Manners': An Addition to a Vocabulary for American Studies," Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association, 22, No. 1 (March 1968), 15.

[4] Ibid., pp. 17 ff.

[5] Brown, p. 113.

[6] "Hawthorne's Supernaturalism," Literary Reviews and Criticism (New York: Gordian Press, 1968), p. 115.

[7] "Self-Reliance," Selections, p. 168.

[8] "Civil Disobedience," Walden & Other Writings, p. 645.

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